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Brandon Sanderson
June 2009

Warbreaker

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Warbreaker

Brandon Sanderson

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

WARBREAKER

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For Emily,
who said yes

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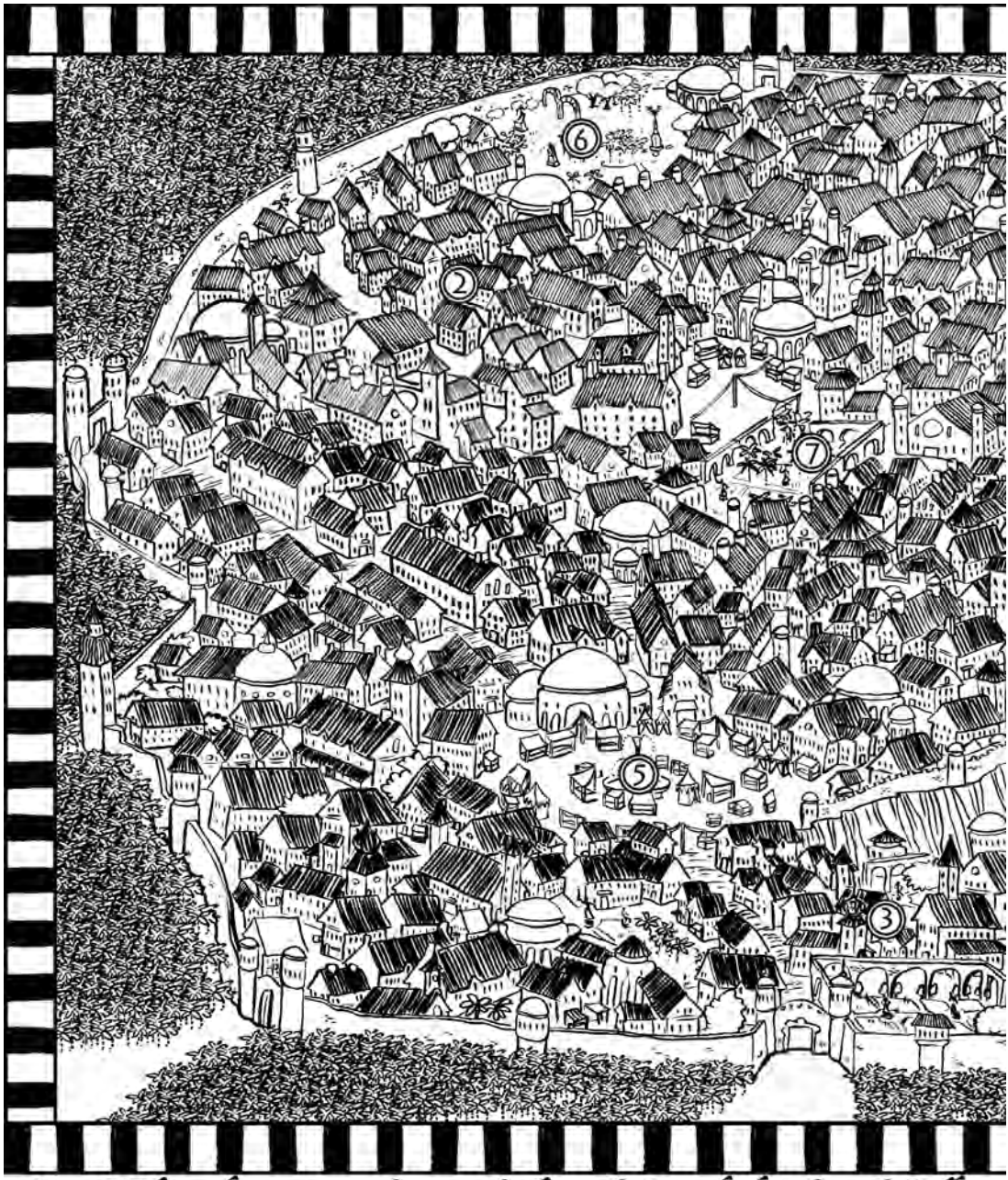
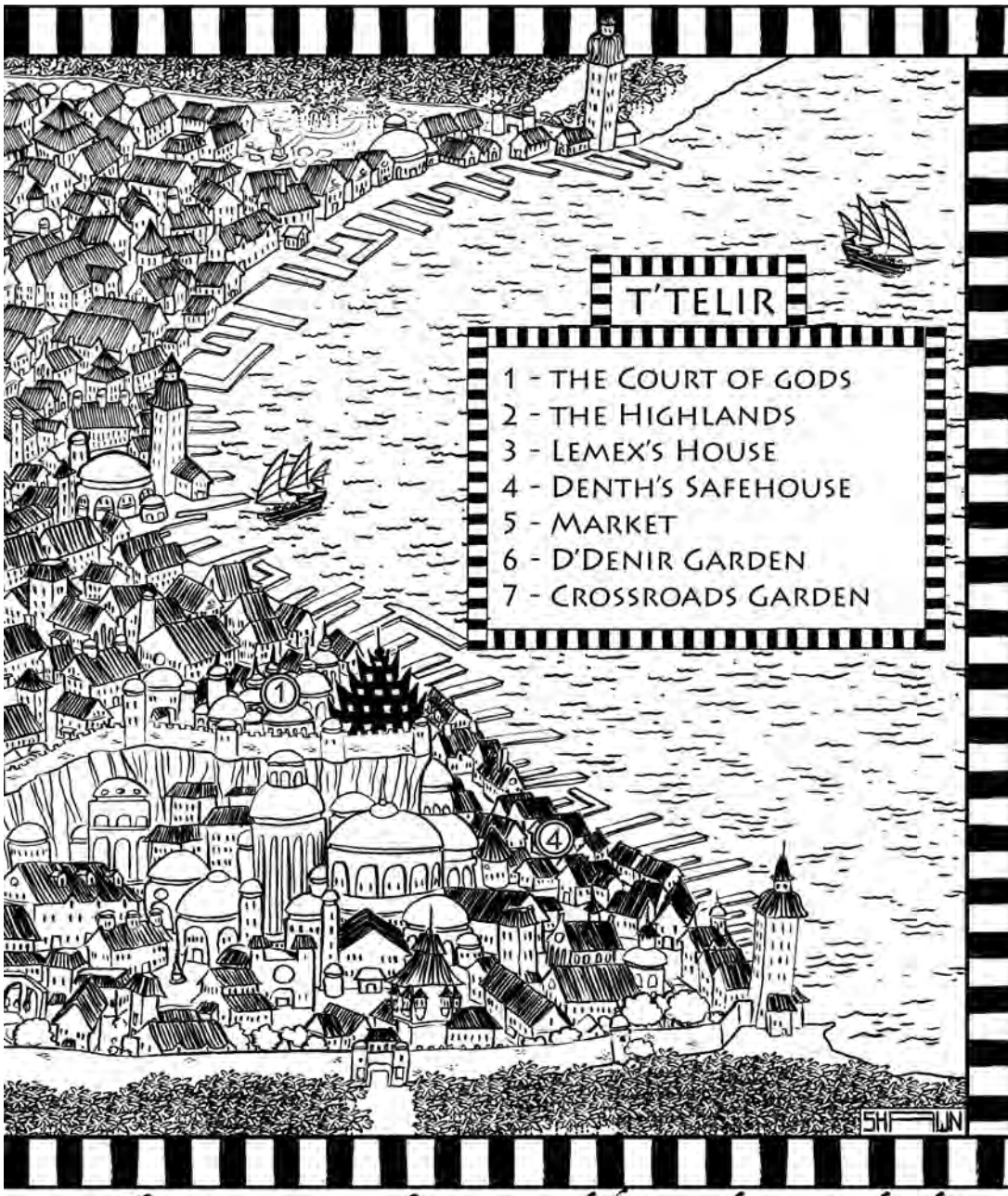


Map of T'Telir copied from a tapestry hanging in the palace of the Returned god Lightsong the Bold, circa



circa 327. This artistic representation of the city is not to scale, but is a useful reference of relative locations

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Working on *Warbreaker* was an unusual process in some ways; you can read more about it on my website. Suffice it to say that I had a more varied pool of alpha readers than normally, many of whom I know primarily through their handles on my forums. I've tried to get everyone's names in here, but I'm sure I'm going to miss some. If you are one of those individuals, feel free to email me, and we'll try to get you in future printings.

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Warbreaker

Prologue

It's funny, Vasher thought, *how many things begin with my getting thrown into prison.*

The guards laughed to one another, slamming the cell door shut with a clang. Vasher stood and dusted himself off, rolling his shoulder and wincing. While the bottom half of his cell door was solid wood, the top half was barred, and he could see the three guards open his large duffel and riffle through his possessions.

One of them noticed him watching. The guard was an oversized beast of a man with a shaved head and a dirty uniform that barely retained the bright yellow and blue coloring of the T'Telir city guard.

Bright colors, Vasher thought. *I'll have to get used to those again.* In any other nation, the vibrant blues and yellows would have been ridiculous on soldiers. This, however, was Hallandren: land of Returned gods, Lifeless servants, BioChromatic research, and—of course—color.

The large guard sauntered up to the cell door, leaving his friends to amuse themselves with Vasher's belongings. "They say you're pretty tough," the man said, sizing up Vasher.

Vasher did not respond.

"The bartender says you beat down some twenty men in the brawl." The guard rubbed his chin. "You don't look that tough to me. Either way, you should have known better than to strike a priest. The others, they'll spend a night locked up. You, though . . . you'll hang. Colorless fool."

Vasher turned away. His cell was functional, if unoriginal. A thin slit at the top of one wall let in light, the stone walls dripped with water and moss, and a pile of dirty straw decomposed in the corner.

"You ignoring me?" the guard asked, stepping closer to the door. The colors of his uniform brightened, as if he'd stepped into a stronger light. The change was slight. Vasher didn't have much Breath remaining, and so his aura didn't do much to the colors around him. The guard didn't notice the change in color—just as he hadn't noticed back in the bar, when he and his buddies had picked Vasher up off the floor and thrown him in their cart. Of course, the change was so slight to the unaided eye that it would have been nearly impossible to pick out.

"Here, now," said one of the men looking through Vasher's duffel. "What's *this*?" Vasher had always found it interesting that the men who watched dungeons tended to be as bad as, or worse than, the men they guarded. Perhaps that was deliberate. Society didn't seem to care if such men were outside the cells or in them, so long as they were kept away from more honest men.

Assuming that such a thing existed.

From Vasher's bag, a guard pulled free a long object wrapped in white linen. The man whistled as he unwrapped the cloth, revealing a long, thin-bladed sword in a silver sheath. The hilt was pure black. "Who do you suppose he stole *this* from?"

The lead guard eyed Vasher, likely wondering if Vasher was some kind of nobleman. Though Hallandren had no aristocracy, many neighboring kingdoms had their lords and ladies. Yet what lord would wear a drab brown cloak, ripped in several places? What lord would sport bruises from a bar fight, a half-grown beard, and boots worn from years of walking? The guard turned away, apparently convinced that Vasher was no lord.

He was right. And he was wrong.

"Let me see that," the lead guard said, taking the sword. He grunted, obviously surprised by its weight. He turned it about, noting the clasp that tied sheath to hilt, keeping the blade from being drawn. He undid the clasp.

The colors in the room deepened. They didn't grow brighter—not the way the guard's vest had when he approached Vasher. Instead, they grew *stronger.* Darker. Reds became maroon. Yellows hardened to gold. Blues approached navy.

"Be careful, friend," Vasher said softly, "that sword can be dangerous."

The guard looked up. All was still. Then the guard snorted and walked away from Vasher's cell, still carrying the sword. The other two followed, bearing Vasher's duffel, entering the guard room at the end of the hallway.

The door thumped shut. Vasher immediately knelt beside the patch of straw, selecting a handful of sturdy lengths. He pulled threads from his cloak—it was beginning to fray at the bottom—and tied the straw into the shape of a small person, perhaps three inches high, with bushy arms and legs. He plucked a hair from one of his eyebrows, set it against the straw figure's head, then reached into his boot and pulled out a brilliant red scarf.

Then Vasher Breathed.

It flowed out of him, puffing into the air, translucent yet radiant, like the color of oil on water in the sun. Vasher felt it leave: BioChromatic Breath, scholars called it. Most people just called it Breath. Each person had one. Or, at least, that was how it usually went. One person, one Breath.

Vasher had around fifty Breaths, just enough to reach the First Heightening. Having so few made him feel poor compared with what he'd once held, but many would consider fifty Breaths to be a great treasure. Unfortunately, even Awakening a small figure made from organic material—using a piece of his own body as a focus—drained away some half of his Breaths.

The little straw figure jerked, sucking in the Breath. In Vasher's hand, half of the brilliant red scarf faded to grey. Vasher leaned down—imagining what he wanted the figure to do—and completed the final step of the process as he gave the Command.

"Fetch keys," he said.

The straw figure stood and raised its single eyebrow toward Vasher.

Vasher pointed toward the guard room. From it, he heard sudden shouts of surprise.

Not much time, he thought.

The straw person ran along the floor, then jumped up, vaulting between the bars. Vasher pulled off his cloak and set it on the floor. It was the perfect shape of a person—marked with rips that matched the scars on Vasher's body, its hood cut with holes to match Vasher's eyes. The closer an object was to human shape and form, the fewer Breaths it took to Awaken.

Vasher leaned down, trying not to think of the days when he'd had enough Breaths to Awaken without regard for shape or focus. That had been a different

time. Wincing, he pulled a tuft of hair from his head, then sprinkled it across the hood of the cloak.

Once again, he Breathed.

It took the rest of his Breath. With it gone—the cloak trembling, the scarf losing the rest of its color—Vasher felt . . . dimmer. Losing one's Breath was not fatal. Indeed, the extra Breaths Vasher used had once belonged to other people. Vasher didn't know who they were; he hadn't gathered these Breaths himself. They had been given to him. But, of course, that was the way it was always supposed to work. One could not take Breath by force.

Being void of Breath *did* change him. Colors didn't seem as bright. He couldn't *feel* the bustling people moving about in the city above, a connection he normally took for granted. It was the awareness all men had for others—that thing which whispered a warning, in the drowsiness of sleep, when someone entered the room. In Vasher, that sense had been magnified fifty times.

And now it was gone. Sucked into the cloak and the straw person, giving them power.

The cloak jerked. Vasher leaned down. "Protect me," he Commanded, and the cloak grew still. He stood, throwing it back on.

The straw figure returned to his window. It carried a large ring of keys. The figure's straw feet were stained red. The crimson blood seemed so dull to Vasher now.

He took the keys. "Thank you," he said. He always thanked them. He didn't know why, particularly considering what he did next. "Your Breath to mine," he commanded, touching the straw person's chest. The straw person immediately fell backward off the door—life draining from it—and Vasher got his Breath back. The familiar sense of awareness returned, the knowledge of connectedness, of *fitting*. He could only take the Breath back because he'd Awakened this creature himself—indeed, Awakenings of this sort were rarely permanent. He used his Breath like a reserve, doling it out, then recovering it.

Compared with what he had once held, twenty-five Breaths was a laughably small number. However, compared with nothing, it seemed infinite. He shivered in satisfaction.

The yells from the guard room died out. The dungeon fell still. He had to keep moving.

Vasher reached through the bars, using the keys to unlock his cell. He pushed the thick door open, rushing out into the hallway, leaving the straw figure discarded on the ground. He didn't walk to the guard room—and the exit beyond it—but instead turned south, penetrating deeper into the dungeon.

This was the most uncertain part of his plan. Finding a tavern that was frequented by priests of the Iridescent Tones had been easy enough. Getting into a bar fight—then striking one of those same priests—had been equally simple. Hallandren took their religious figures very seriously, and Vasher had earned himself not the usual imprisonment in a local jail, but a trip to the God King's dungeons.

Knowing the kind of men who tended to guard such dungeons, he'd had a pretty good idea that they would try to draw Nightblood. That had given him the diversion he'd needed to get the keys.

But now came the unpredictable part.

Vasher stopped, Awakened cloak rustling. It was easy to locate the cell he wanted, for around it a large patch of stone had been drained of color, leaving both walls and doors a dull grey. It was a place to imprison an Awakener, for no color meant no Awakening. Vasher stepped up to the door, looking through the bars. A man hung by his arms from the ceiling, naked and chained. His color was vibrant to Vasher's eyes, his skin a pure tan, his bruises brilliant splashes of blue and violet.

The man was gagged. Another precaution. In order to Awaken, the man would need three things: Breath, color, and a Command. The harmonics and the hues, some called it. The Iridescent Tones, the relationship between color and sound. A Command had to be spoken clearly and firmly in the Awakener's native language—any stuttering, any mispronunciation, would invalidate the Awakening. The Breath would be drawn out, but the object would be unable to act.

Vasher used the prison keys to unlock the cell door, then stepped inside. This man's aura made colors grow brighter by sharp measure when they got close to him. Anyone would be able to notice an aura that strong, though it was much easier for someone who had reached the First Heightening.

It wasn't the strongest BioChromatic aura Vasher had ever seen—those belonged to the Returned, known as gods here in Hallandren. Still, the prisoner's BioChroma was very impressive and much, much stronger than

Vasher's own. The prisoner held a lot of Breaths. Hundreds upon hundreds of them.

The man swung in his bonds, studying Vasher, gagged lips bleeding from lack of water. Vasher hesitated only briefly, then reached up and pulled the gag free.

"You," the prisoner whispered, coughing slightly. "Are you here to free me?"

"No, Vahr," Vasher said quietly. "I'm here to kill you."

Vahr snorted. Captivity hadn't been easy on him. When Vasher had last seen Vahr, he'd been plump. Judging by his emaciated body, he'd been without food for some time now. The cuts, bruises, and burn marks on his flesh were fresh.

Both the torture and the haunted look in Vahr's bag-rimmed eyes bespoke a solemn truth. Breath could only be transferred by willing, intentional Command. That Command could, however, be encouraged.

"So," Vahr croaked, "you judge me, just like everyone else."

"Your failed rebellion is not my concern. I just want your Breath."

"You and the entire Hallandren court."

"Yes. But you're not going to give it to one of the Returned. You're going to give it to me. In exchange for killing you."

"Doesn't seem like much of a trade." There was a hardness—a void of emotion—in Vahr that Vasher had not seen the last time they had parted, years before.

Odd, Vasher thought, *that I should finally, after all of this time, find something in the man that I can identify with.*

Vasher kept a wary distance from Vahr. Now that the man's voice was free, he could Command. However, he was touching nothing except for the metal chains, and metal was very difficult to Awaken. It had never been alive, and it was far from the form of a man. Even during the height of his power, Vasher himself had only managed to Awaken metal on a few, select occasions. Of course, some extremely powerful Awakeners could bring objects to life that they weren't touching, but that were in the sound of their voice. That, however, required the Ninth Heightening. Even Vahr didn't have *that* much Breath. In fact, Vasher knew of only one living person who did: the God King himself.

That meant Vasher was probably safe. Vahr contained a great wealth of

Breath, but had nothing to Awaken. Vasher walked around the chained man, finding it very difficult to offer any sympathy. Vahr had earned his fate. Yet the priests would not let him die while he held so much Breath; if he died, it would be wasted. Gone. Irretrievable.

Not even the government of Hallandren—which had such strict laws about the buying and passing of Breath—could let such a treasure slip away. They wanted it badly enough to forestall the execution of even a high-profile criminal like Vahr. In retrospect, they would curse themselves for not leaving him better guarded.

But, then, Vasher had been waiting two years for an opportunity like this one.

"Well?" Vahr asked.

"Give me the Breath, Vahr," Vasher said, stepping forward.

Vahr snorted. "I doubt you have the skill of the God King's torturers, Vasher—and I've withstood them for two weeks now."

"You'd be surprised. But that doesn't matter. You *are* going to give me your Breath. You know you have only two choices. Give it to me, or give it to them."

Vahr hung by his wrists, rotating slowly. Silent.

"You don't have much time to consider," Vasher said. "Any moment now, someone is going to discover the dead guards outside. The alarm will be raised. I'll leave you, you *will* be tortured again, and you *will* eventually break. Then all the power you've gathered will go to the very people you vowed to destroy."

Vahr stared at the floor. Vasher let him hang for a few moments, and could see that the reality of the situation was clear to him. Finally, Vahr looked up at Vasher. "That . . . thing you bear. It's here, in the city?"

Vasher nodded.

"The screams I heard earlier? It caused them?"

Vasher nodded again.

"How long will you be in T'Telir?"

"For a time. A year, perhaps."

"Will you use it against them?"

"My goals are my own to know, Vahr. Will you take my deal or not? Quick death in exchange for those Breaths. I promise you this. Your enemies will *not* have them."

Vahr grew quiet. "It's yours," he finally whispered.

Vasher reached over, resting his hand on Vahr's forehead—careful not to let any part of his clothing touch the man's skin, lest Vahr draw forth color for Awakening.

Vahr didn't move. He looked numb. Then, just as Vasher began to worry that the prisoner had changed his mind, Vahr Breathed. The color drained from him. The beautiful Iridescence, the aura that had made him look majestic despite his wounds and chains. It flowed from his mouth, hanging in the air, shimmering like mist. Vasher drew it in, closing his eyes.

"My life to yours," Vahr Commanded, a hint of despair in his voice. "My Breath become yours."

The Breath flooded into Vasher, and everything became vibrant. His brown cloak now seemed deep and rich in color. The blood on the floor was intensely red, as if aflame. Even Vahr's skin seemed a masterpiece of color, the surface marked by deep black hairs, blue bruises, and sharp red cuts. It had been years since Vasher had felt such . . . *life.*

He gasped, falling to his knees as it overwhelmed him, and he had to drop a hand to the stone floor to keep himself from toppling over. *How did I live without this?*

He knew that his senses hadn't actually improved, yet he felt so much more alert. More aware of the beauty of sensation. When he touched the stone floor, he marveled at its roughness. And the sound of wind passing through the thin dungeon window up above. Had it always been that melodic? How could he not have noticed?

"Keep your part of the bargain," Vahr said. Vasher noted the tones in his voice, the beauty of each one, how close they were to harmonics. Vasher had gained perfect pitch. A gift for anyone who reached the Second Heightening. It would be good to have that again.

Vasher could, of course, have up to the Fifth Heightening at any time, if he wished. That would require certain sacrifices he wasn't willing to make. And so he forced himself to do it the old-fashioned way, by gathering Breaths from people like Vahr.

Vasher stood, then pulled out the colorless scarf he had used earlier. He tossed it over Vahr's shoulder, then Breathed.

He didn't bother making the scarf have human shape, didn't need to use

a bit of his hair or skin for a focus—though he did have to draw the color from his shirt.

Vasher met Vahr's resigned eyes.

"Strangle things," Vasher Commanded, fingers touching the quivering scarf.

It twisted immediately, pulling away a large—yet now inconsequential—amount of Breath. The scarf quickly wrapped around Vahr's neck, tightening, choking him. Vahr didn't struggle or gasp, he simply watched Vasher with hatred until his eyes bulged and he died.

Hatred. Vasher had known enough of that in his time. He quietly reached up and recovered his Breath from the scarf, then left Vahr dangling in his cell. Vasher passed quietly though the prison, marveling at the color of the woods and the stones. After a few moments of walking, he noticed a new color in the hallway. Red.

He stepped around the pool of blood—which was seeping down the inclined dungeon floor—and moved into the guard room. The three guards lay dead. One of them sat in a chair. Nightblood, still mostly sheathed, had been rammed through the man's chest. About an inch of a dark black blade was visible beneath the silver sheath.

Vasher carefully slid the weapon fully back into its sheath. He did up the clasp.

I did very well today, a voice said in his mind.

Vasher didn't respond to the sword.

I killed them all, Nightblood continued. *Aren't you proud of me?*

Vasher picked up the weapon, accustomed to its unusual weight, and carried it in one hand. He recovered his duffel and slung it over his shoulder.

I knew you'd be impressed, Nightblood said, sounding satisfied.

1

There were great advantages to being unimportant.

True, by many people's standards, Siri wasn't "unimportant." She was, after all, the daughter of a king. Fortunately, her father had four living children, and Siri—at seventeen years of age—was the youngest. Fafen, the daughter just older than Siri, had done the family duty and become a monk. Above Fafen was Ridger, the eldest son. He would inherit the throne.

And then there was Vivenna. Siri sighed as she walked down the path back to the city. Vivenna, the firstborn, was . . . well . . . Vivenna. Beautiful, poised, perfect in most every way. It was a good thing, too, considering the fact that she was betrothed to a god. Either way, Siri—as fourth child—was redundant. Vivenna and Ridger had to focus on their studies; Fafen had to do her work in the pastures and homes. Siri, however, could get away with being unimportant. That meant she could disappear into the wilderness for hours at a time.

People would notice, of course, and she *would* get into trouble. Yet even her father would have to admit that her disappearance hadn't caused much inconvenience. The city got along just fine without Siri—in fact, it tended to do a little better when she wasn't around.

Unimportance. To another, it might have been offensive. To Siri it was a blessing.

She smiled, walking into the city proper. She drew the inevitable stares. While Bevalis was technically the capital of Idris, it wasn't that big, and

everyone knew her by sight. Judging by the stories Siri had heard from passing ramblemen, her home was hardly even a village compared with the massive metropolises in other nations.

She liked it the way it was, even with the muddy streets, the thatched cottages, and the boring—yet sturdy—stone walls. Women chasing runaway geese, men pulling donkeys laden with spring seed, and children leading sheep on their way to pasture. A grand city in Xaka, Hudres, or even terrible Hallandren might have exotic sights, but it would be crowded with faceless, shouting, jostling crowds, and haughty noblemen. Not Siri's preference; she generally found even Bevalis to be a bit busy for her.

Still, she thought, looking down at her utilitarian grey dress, *I'll bet those cities have more colors. That's something I might like to see.*

Her hair wouldn't stand out so much there. As usual, the long locks had gone blond with joy while she'd been out in the fields. She concentrated, trying to rein them in, but she was only able to bring the color to a dull brown. As soon as she stopped focusing, her hair just went back to the way it had been. She'd never been very good at controlling it. Not like Vivenna.

As she continued through the town, a group of small figures began trailing her. She smiled, pretending to ignore the children until one of them was brave enough to run forward and tug on her dress. Then she turned, smiling. They regarded her with solemn faces. Idris children were trained even at this age to avoid shameful outbursts of emotion. Austrin teachings said there was nothing wrong with feelings, but drawing attention to yourself with them was wrong.

Siri had never been very devout. It wasn't her fault, she reasoned, if Austre had made her with a distinct inability to obey. The children waited patiently until Siri reached into her apron and pulled out a couple of brightly colored flowers. The children's eyes opened wide, gazing at the vibrant colors. Three of the flowers were blue, one yellow.

The flowers stood out starkly against the town's determined drabness. Other than what one could find in the skin and eyes of the people, there wasn't a drop of color in sight. Stones had been whitewashed, clothing bleached grey or tan. All to keep the color away.

For without color, there could be no Awakeners.

The girl who had tugged Siri's skirt finally took the flowers in one hand and dashed away with them, the other children following behind. Siri caught

a look of disproval in the eyes of several passing villagers. None of them confronted her, though. Being a princess—even an unimportant one—did have its perks.

She continued on toward the palace. It was a low, single-story building with a large, packed-earth courtyard. Siri avoided the crowds of haggling people at the front, rounding to the back and going in the kitchen entrance. Mab, the kitchen mistress, stopped singing as the door opened, then eyed Siri.

"Your father's been looking for you, child," Mab said, turning away and humming as she attacked a pile of onions.

"I suspect that he has." Siri walked over and sniffed at a pot, which bore the calm scent of boiling potatoes.

"Went to the hills again, didn't you? Skipped your tutorial sessions, I'll bet."

Siri smiled, then pulled out another of the bright yellow flowers, spinning it between two fingers.

Mab rolled her eyes. "And been corrupting the city youth again, I suspect. Honestly, girl, you should be beyond these things at your age. Your father will have words with you about shirking your responsibilities."

"I like words," Siri said. "And I always learn a few new ones when Father gets angry. I shouldn't neglect my education, now should I?"

Mab snorted, dicing some pickled cucumbers into the onions.

"Honestly, Mab," Siri said, twirling the flower, feeling her hair shade a little bit red. "I don't see what the problem is. Austre made the flowers, right? He put the colors on them, so they can't be evil. I mean, we call him God of Colors, for heaven's sake."

"Flowers ain't evil," Mab said, adding something that looked like grass to her concoction, "assuming they're left where Austre put them. We shouldn't use Austre's beauty to make ourselves more important."

"A flower doesn't make me look more important."

"Oh?" Mab asked, adding the grass, cucumber, and onions to one of her boiling pots. She banged the side of the pot with the flat of her knife, listening, then nodded to herself and began fishing under the counter for more vegetables. "You tell me," she continued, voice muffled. "You really think walking through the city with a flower like that didn't draw attention to yourself?"

"That's only because the city is so drab. If there were a bit of color around, nobody would notice a flower."

Mab reappeared, hefting a box filled with various tubers. "You'd have us decorate the place like Hallandren? Maybe we should start inviting Awakeners into the city? How'd you like that? Some devil sucking the souls out of children, strangling people with their own clothing? Bringing men back from the grave, then using their dead bodies for cheap labor? Sacrificing women on their unholy altars?"

Siri felt her hair whiten slightly with anxiety. *Stop that!* she thought. The hair seemed to have a mind of its own, responding to gut feelings.

"That sacrificing-maidens part is only a story," Siri said. "They don't really do that."

"Stories come from somewhere."

"Yes, they come from old women sitting by the hearth in the winter. I don't think we need to be so frightened. The Hallandren will do what they want, which is fine by me, as long as they leave us alone."

Mab chopped tubers, not looking up.

"We've got the treaty, Mab," Siri said. "Father and Vivenna will make sure we're safe, and that will make the Hallandren leave us alone."

"And if they don't?"

"They will. You don't need to worry."

"They have better armies," Mab said, chopping, not looking up, "better steel, more food, and those . . . those *things.* It makes people worry. Maybe not *you,* but sensible folk."

The cook's words were hard to dismiss out of hand. Mab had a sense, a wisdom beyond her instinct for spices and broths. However, she *also* tended to fret. "You're worrying about nothing, Mab. You'll see."

"I'm just saying that this is a bad time for a royal princess to be running around with flowers, standin' out and inviting Austre's dislike."

Siri sighed. "Fine, then," she said, tossing her last flower into the stewpot. "Now we can all stand out together."

Mab froze, then rolled her eyes, chopping a root. "I assume that was a vanavel flower?"

"Of course," Siri said, sniffing at the steaming pot. "I know better than to ruin a good stew. And I still say you're overreacting."

Mab sniffed. "Here," she said, pulling out another knife. "Make yourself useful. There's roots that need choppin'."

"Shouldn't I report to my father?" Siri said, grabbing a gnarled vanavel root and beginning to chop.

"He'll just send you back here and make you work in the kitchens as a punishment," Mab said, banging the pot with her knife again. She firmly believed that she could judge when a dish was done by the way the pot rang.

"Austre help me if Father ever discovers I like it down here."

"You just like being close to the food," Mab said, fishing Siri's flower out of the stew then tossing it aside. "Either way, you can't report to him. He's in conference with Yarda."

Siri gave no reaction—she simply continued to chop. Her hair, however, grew blond with excitement. *Father's conferences with Yarda usually last hours,* she thought. *Not much point in simply sitting around, waiting for him to get done. . . .*

Mab turned to get something off the table, and by the time she looked back, Siri had bolted out the door and was on her way toward the royal stables. Bare minutes later, she galloped away from the palace, wearing her favorite brown cloak, feeling an exhilarated thrill that sent her hair into a deep blond. A nice quick ride would be a good way to round out the day.

After all, her punishment was likely to be the same either way.

Dedelin, king of Idris, set the letter down on his desk. He had stared at it long enough. It was time to decide whether or not to send his eldest daughter to her death.

Despite the advent of spring, his chamber was cold. Warmth was a rare thing in the Idris highlands; it was coveted and enjoyed, for it lingered only briefly each summer. The chambers were also stark. There was a beauty in simplicity. Even a king had no right to display arrogance by ostentation.

Dedelin stood up, looking out his window and into the courtyard. The palace was small by the world's standards—only a single story high, with a peaked wooden roof and squat stone walls. But it was large by Idris standards, and it bordered on flamboyant. This could be forgiven, for the palace was also a meeting hall and center of operations for his entire kingdom.

The king could see General Yarda out of the corner of his eye. The burly

man stood waiting, his hands clasped behind his back, his thick beard tied in three places. He was the only other person in the room.

Dedelin glanced back at the letter. The paper was a bright pink, and the garish color stood out on his desk like a drop of blood in the snow. Pink was a color one would never see in Idris. In Hallandren, however—center of the world's dye industry—such tasteless hues were commonplace.

"Well, old friend?" Dedelin asked. "Do you have any advice for me?"

General Yarda shook his head. "War is coming, Your Majesty. I feel it in the winds and read it in the reports of our spies. Hallandren still considers us rebels, and our passes to the north are too tempting. They will attack."

"Then I shouldn't send her," Dedelin said, looking back out his window. The courtyard bustled with people in furs and cloaks coming to market.

"We can't stop the war, Your Majesty," Yarda said. "But . . . we can slow it."

Dedelin turned back.

Yarda stepped forward, speaking softly. "This is not a good time. Our troops still haven't recovered from those Vendis raids last fall, and with the fires in the granary this winter . . ." Yarda shook his head. "We *cannot* afford to get into a defensive war in the summer. Our best ally against the Hallandren are the snows. We can't let this conflict occur on their terms. If we do, we are dead."

The words all made sense.

"Your Majesty," Yarda said, "they are *waiting* for us to break the treaty as an excuse to attack. If we move first, they will strike."

"If we keep the treaty, they will *still* strike," Dedelin said.

"But later. Perhaps months later. You know how slow Hallandren politics are. If we keep the treaty, there will be debates and arguments. If those last until the snows, then we will have gained the time we need so badly."

It all made sense. Brutal, honest sense. All these years, Dedelin had stalled and watched as the Hallandren court grew more and more aggressive, more and more agitated. Every year, voices called for an assault on the "rebel Idrians" living up in the highlands. Every year, those voices grew louder and more plentiful. Every year, Dedelin's placating and politics kept the armies away. He had hoped, perhaps, that the rebel leader Vahr and his Pahn Kahl dissidents would draw attention away from Idris, but Vahr had been captured, his

so-called army dispersed. His actions had only served to make Hallandren more focused on its enemies.

The peace would not last. Not with Idris ripe, not with the trade routes worth so much. Not with the current crop of Hallandren gods, who seemed so much more erratic than their predecessors. He *knew* all of that. But he also knew that breaking the treaty would be foolish. When you were cast into the den of a beast, you did not provoke it to anger.

Yarda joined him beside the window, looking out, leaning one elbow against the side of the frame. He was a harsh man born of harsh winters. But he was also as good a man as Dedelin had ever known—a part of the king longed to marry Vivenna to the general's own son.

That was foolishness. Dedelin had always known this day would come. He'd crafted the treaty himself, and it demanded he send his daughter to marry the God King. The Hallandren needed a daughter of the royal blood to reintroduce the traditional bloodline into their monarchy. It was something the depraved and vainglorious people of the lowlands had long coveted, and only that specific clause in the treaty had saved Idris these twenty years.

That treaty had been the first official act of Dedelin's reign, negotiated furiously following his father's assassination. Dedelin gritted his teeth. How quickly he'd bowed before the whims of his enemies. Yet he would do it again; an Idris monarch would do anything for his people. That was one big difference between Idris and Hallandren.

"If we send her, Yarda," Dedelin said, "we send her to her death."

"Maybe they won't harm her," Yarda finally said.

"You know better than that. The first thing they'll do when war comes is use her against me. This is *Hallandren.* They invite Awakeners into their palaces, for Austre's sake!"

Yarda fell silent. Finally, he shook his head. "Latest reports say their army has grown to include some forty thousand Lifeless."

Lord God of Colors, Dedelin thought, glancing at the letter again. Its language was simple. Vivenna's twenty-second birthday had come, and the terms of the treaty stipulated that Dedelin could wait no longer.

"Sending Vivenna is a poor plan, but it's our only plan," Yarda said. "With more time, I know I can bring the Tedradel to our cause—they've hated Hallandren since the Manywar. And perhaps I can find a way to rile

Vahr's broken rebel faction in Hallandren itself. At the very least, we can build, gather supplies, live another year." Yarda turned to him. "If we don't send the Hallandren their princess, the war will be seen as our fault. Who will support us? They will demand to know why we refused to follow the treaty our own king wrote!"

"And if we do send them Vivenna, it will introduce the royal blood into their monarchy, and that will have an even *more* legitimate claim on the highlands!"

"Perhaps," Yarda said. "But if we both know they're going to attack anyway, then what do we care about their claim? At least this way, perhaps they will wait until an heir is born before the assault comes."

More time. The general always asked for more time. But what about when that time came at the cost of Dedelin's own child?

Yarda wouldn't hesitate to send one soldier to die if it would mean time enough to get the rest of his troops into better position to attack, Dedelin thought. *We are Idris. How can I ask anything less of my daughter than I'd demand of one of my troops?*

It was just that thinking of Vivenna in the God King's arms, being forced to bear that creature's child . . . it nearly made his hair bleach with concern. That child would become a stillborn monster who would become the next Returned god of the Hallandren.

There is another way, a part of his mind whispered. *You don't have to send Vivenna. . . .*

A knock came at his door. Both he and Yarda turned, and Dedelin called for the visitor to enter. He should have been able to guess whom it would be.

Vivenna stood in a quiet grey dress, looking so young to him still. Yet she was the perfect image of an Idris woman—hair kept in a modest knot, no makeup to draw attention to the face. She was not timid or soft, like some noblewomen from the northern kingdoms. She was just composed. Composed, simple, hard, and capable. Idrian.

"You have been in here for several hours, Father," Vivenna said, bowing her head respectfully to Yarda. "The servants speak of a colorful envelope carried by the general when he entered. I believe I know what it contained."

Dedelin met her eyes, then waved for her to seat herself. She softly closed the door, then took one of the wooden chairs from the side of the room. Yarda remained standing, after the masculine fashion. Vivenna eyed

the letter sitting on the desk. She was calm, her hair controlled and kept a respectful black. She was twice as devout as Dedelin, and—unlike her youngest sister—she never drew attention to herself with fits of emotion.

"I assume that I should prepare myself for departure, then," Vivenna said, hands in her lap.

Dedelin opened his mouth, but could find no objection. He glanced at Yarda, who just shook his head, resigned.

"I have prepared my entire life for this, Father," Vivenna said. "I am ready. Siri, however, will not take this well. She left on a ride an hour ago. I should depart the city before she gets back. That will avoid any potential scene she might make."

"Too late," Yarda said, grimacing and nodding toward the window. Just outside, people scattered in the courtyard as a figure galloped through the gates. She wore a deep brown cloak that bordered on being too colorful, and—of course—she had her hair down.

The hair was yellow.

Dedelin felt his rage and frustration growing. Only Siri could make him lose control, and—as if in ironic counterpoint to the source of his anger—he felt his hair change. To those watching, a few locks of hair on his head would have bled from black to red. It was the identifying mark of the royal family, who had fled to the Idris highlands at the climax of the Manywar. Others could hide their emotions. The royals, however, manifested what they felt in the very hair on their heads.

Vivenna watched him, pristine as always, and her poise gave him strength as he forced his hair to turn black again. It took more willpower than any common man could understand to control the treasonous Royal Locks. Dedelin wasn't sure how Vivenna managed it so well.

Poor girl never even had a childhood, he thought. From birth, Vivenna's life had been pointed toward this single event. His firstborn child, the girl who had always seemed like a part of himself. The girl who had always made him proud; the woman who had already earned the love and respect of her people. In his mind's eye he saw the queen she could become, stronger even than he. Someone who could guide them through the dark days ahead.

But only if she survived that long.

"I will prepare myself for the trip," Vivenna said, rising.

"No," Dedelin said.

Yarda and Vivenna both turned.

"Father," Vivenna said. "If we break this treaty, it will mean war. I am prepared to sacrifice for our people. You taught me that."

"You will *not* go," Dedelin said firmly, turning back toward the window. Outside, Siri was laughing with one of the stablemen. Dedelin could hear her outburst even from a distance; her hair had turned a flame-colored red.

Lord God of Colors, forgive me, he thought. *What a terrible choice for a father to make. The treaty is specific: I must send the Hallandren my daughter when Vivenna reaches her twenty-second birthday. But it doesn't actually say* which *daughter I am required to send.*

If he didn't send Hallandren one of his daughters, they would attack immediately. If he sent the wrong one, they might be angered, but he knew they wouldn't attack. They would wait until they had an heir. That would gain Idris at least nine months.

And . . . he thought, *If they were to try to use Vivenna against me, I know that I wouldn't be able to stop myself from giving in.* It was shameful to admit that fact, but in the end, it was what made the decision for him.

Dedelin turned back toward the room. "Vivenna, you will not go to wed the tyrant god of our enemies. I'm sending Siri in your place."

2

Siri sat, stunned, in a rattling carriage, her homeland growing more and more distant with each bump and shake.

Two days had passed, and she still didn't understand. This was supposed to be Vivenna's task. Everybody understood that. Idris had thrown a celebration on the day of Vivenna's birth. The king had started her classes from the day she could walk, training her in the ways of court life and politics. Fafen, the second daughter, had also taken the lessons in case Vivenna died before the day of the wedding. But not Siri. She'd been redundant. Unimportant.

No more.

She glanced out the window. Her father had sent the kingdom's nicest carriage—along with an honor guard of twenty soldiers—to bear her southward. That, combined with a steward and several serving boys, made for a procession as grand as Siri had ever seen. It bordered on ostentation, which might have thrilled her, had it not been bearing her away from Idris.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be, she thought. *This isn't the way* any *of it is supposed to happen!*

And yet it had.

Nothing made sense. The carriage bumped, but she just sat, numb. *At the very least,* she thought, *they could have let me ride horseback, rather than forcing me to sit in this carriage.* But that, unfortunately, wouldn't have been an appropriate way to enter Hallandren.

Hallandren.

She felt her hair bleach white with fear. She was being sent to *Hallandren,* a kingdom her people cursed with every second breath. She wouldn't see her father again for a long while, if ever. She wouldn't speak with Vivenna, or listen to the tutors, or be chided by Mab, or ride the royal horses, or go looking for flowers in the wilderness, or work in the kitchens. She'd . . .

Marry the God King. The terror of Hallandren, the monster that had never drawn a living breath. In Hallandren, his power was absolute. He could order an execution on a whim.

I'll be safe, though, won't I? she thought. *I'll be his wife.*

Wife. I'm getting married.

Oh Austre, God of Colors . . . she thought, feeling sick. She curled up with her legs against her chest—her hair growing so white that it seemed to shine—and lay down on the seat of the carriage, not sure if the shaking she felt was her own trembling or the carriage continuing its inexorable path southward.

"I THINK that you should reconsider your decision, Father," Vivenna said calmly, sitting decorously—as she'd been trained—with hands in her lap.

"I've considered and reconsidered, Vivenna," King Dedelin said, waving his hand. "My mind is made up."

"Siri is not suited to this task."

"She'll do fine," her father said, looking through some papers on his desk. "All she really needs to do is have a baby. I'm certain she's 'suited' to that task."

What then of my training? Vivenna thought. *Twenty-two years of preparation? What was that, if the only point in being sent was to provide a convenient womb?*

She kept her hair black, her voice solemn, her face calm. "Siri must be distraught," she said. "I don't think she's emotionally capable of dealing with this."

Her father looked up, his hair fading a bit red—the black bleeding away like paint running off a canvas. It showed his annoyance.

He's more upset by her departure than he's willing to admit.

"This is for the best for our people, Vivenna," he said, working—with

obvious effort—to turn his hair black again. "If war comes, Idris will need you here."

"If war comes, what of Siri?"

Her father fell silent. "Perhaps it won't come," he finally said.

Austre . . . Vivenna thought with shock. *He doesn't believe that. He thinks he's sent her to her death.*

"I know what you are thinking," her father said, drawing her attention back to his eyes. So solemn. "How could I choose one over the other? How could I send Siri to die and leave you here to live? I didn't do it based on personal preference, no matter what people may think. I did what will be best for Idris when this war comes."

When this war comes. Vivenna looked up, meeting his eyes. "I was going to stop the war, Father. I was to be the God King's bride! I was going to speak with him, persuade him. I've been trained with the political knowledge, the understanding of customs, the—"

"Stop the war?" her father asked, cutting in. Only then did Vivenna realize how brash she must have sounded. She looked away.

"Vivenna, child," her father said. "There is no stopping this war. Only the promise of a daughter of the royal line kept them away this long, and sending Siri may buy us time. And . . . perhaps I've sent her to safety, even when war flares. Perhaps they will value her bloodline to the point that they leave her alive—a backup should the heir she bears pass away." He grew distant. "Yes," he continued, "perhaps it is not Siri we should be fearing for, but . . ."

But ourselves, Vivenna finished in her mind. She was not privy to all of her father's war planning, but she knew enough. War would not favor Idris. In a conflict with Hallandren, there was little chance they would win. It would be devastating for their people and their way of life.

"Father, I—"

"Please, Vivenna," he said quietly. "I cannot speak of this further. Go now. We will converse later."

Later. After Siri had traveled even farther away, after it would be much more difficult to bring her back. Yet Vivenna rose. She was obedient; it was the way she had been trained. That was one of the things that had always separated her from her sister.

She left her father's study, closing the door behind her, then walked through the wooden palace hallways, pretending that she didn't see the

stares or hear the whispers. She made her way to her room—which was small and unadorned—and sat down on her bed, hands in her lap.

She didn't agree at all with her father's assessment. She *could* have done something. She was to have been the God King's bride. That would have given her influence in the court. Everyone knew that the God King himself was distant when it came to the politics of his nation, but surely his wife could have played a role in defending the interests of her people.

And her father had thrown that away?

He really must believe that there is nothing that can be done to stop the invasion. That turned sending Siri into simply another political maneuver to buy time. Just as Idris had been doing for decades. Either way, if the sacrifice of a royal daughter to the Hallandren was that important, then it still should have been Vivenna's place to go. It had always been *her* duty to prepare for marriage to the God King. Not Siri's, not Fafen's. Vivenna's.

In being saved, she didn't feel grateful. Nor did she feel that she would better serve Idris by staying in Bevalis. If her father died, Yarda would be far better suited to rule during wartime than Vivenna. Besides, Ridger—Vivenna's younger brother—had been groomed as heir for years.

She had been preserved for no reason. It seemed a punishment, in some ways. She'd listened, prepared, learned, and practiced. Everyone said that she was perfect. Why, then, wasn't she good enough to serve as intended?

She had no good answer for herself. She could only sit and fret, hands in her lap, and face the awful truth. Her purpose in life had been stolen and given to another. She was redundant now. Useless.

Unimportant.

"WHAT WAS HE *THINKING*!" Siri snapped, hanging half out the window of her carriage as it bounced along the earthen road. A young soldier marched beside the vehicle, looking uncomfortable in the afternoon light.

"I mean really," Siri said. "Sending *me* to marry the Hallandren king. That's silly, isn't it? Surely you've heard about the kinds of things I do. Wandering off when nobody's looking. Ignoring my lessons. I throw angry fits, for Color's sake!!"

The guard glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise gave no reaction. Siri didn't really care. She wasn't yelling at him so much as just *yelling.* She hung precariously from the window, feeling the wind play with her hair—long, red, straight—and stoking her anger. Fury kept her from weeping.

The green spring hills of the Idris Highlands had slowly faded away as the days had passed. In fact, they were probably in Hallandren already—the border between the two kingdoms was vague, which wasn't surprising, considering that they'd been one nation up until the Manywar.

She eyed the poor guard—whose only way of dealing with a raving princess was ignoring her. Then she finally slumped back into the carriage. She shouldn't have treated him so, but, well, she'd just been sold off like some hunk of mutton—doomed by a document that had been written years before she'd even been born. If anyone had a right to a tantrum, it was Siri.

Maybe that's the reason for all of this, she thought, crossing her arms on the windowsill. *Maybe Father was tired of my tantrums, and just wanted to get rid of me.*

That seemed a little far-fetched. There were easier ways to deal with Siri—ways that didn't include sending her to represent Idris in a foreign court. Why, then? Did he really think she'd do a good job? That gave her pause. Then she considered how ridiculous it was. Her father wouldn't have assumed that she'd do a better job than Vivenna. Nobody did *anything* better than Vivenna.

Siri sighed, feeling her hair turn a pensive brown. At least the landscape was interesting, and in order to keep herself from feeling any more frustrated, she let it distract her for the moment. Hallandren was in the lowlands, a place of tropical forests and strange, colorful animals. Siri had heard the descriptions from ramblemen, and even confirmed their accounts in the occasional book she'd been forced to read. She'd thought she knew what to expect. Yet as the hills gave way to deep grasslands and then the trees finally began to crowd the road, Siri began to realize that there was something no tome or tale could adequately describe.

Colors.

In the highlands, flower patches were rare and unconnected, as if they understood how poorly they fit with Idris philosophy. Here, they appeared

to be everywhere. Tiny flowers grew in great blanketing swaths on the ground. Large, drooping pink blossoms hung from trees, like bundles of grapes, flowers growing practically on top of one another in a large cluster. Even the weeds had flowers. Siri would have picked some of them, if not for the way that the soldiers regarded them with hostility.

If I feel this anxious, she realized, *those guards must feel more so.* She wasn't the only one who had been sent away from family and friends. When would these men be allowed to return? Suddenly, she felt even more guilty for subjecting the young soldier to her outburst.

I'll send them back when I arrive, she thought. Then she immediately felt her hair grow white. Sending the men back would leave her alone in a city filled with Lifeless, Awakeners, and pagans.

Yet what good would twenty soldiers do her? Better that someone, at least, be allowed to return home.

"ONE WOULD THINK that you would be happy," Fafen said. "After all, you no longer have to marry a tyrant."

Vivenna plopped a bruise-colored berry into her basket, then moved on to a different bush. Fafen worked on one nearby. She wore the white robes of a monk, her hair completely shorn. Fafen was the middle sister in almost every way—midway between Siri and Vivenna in height, less proper than Vivenna, yet hardly as careless as Siri. Fafen was a bit curvier than either of them, which had caught the eyes of several young men in the village. However, the fact that they would have to become monks themselves if they wanted to marry her kept them in check. If Fafen noticed how popular she was, she'd never shown it. She'd made the decision to become a monk before her tenth birthday, and her father had wholeheartedly approved. Every noble or rich family was traditionally obligated to provide one person to the monasteries. It was against the Five Visions to be selfish, even with one's own blood.

The two sisters gathered berries that Fafen would later distribute to those in need. The monk's fingers were dyed slightly purple by the work. Vivenna wore gloves. That much color on her hands would be unseemly.

"Yes," Fafen said, "I do think you're taking this all wrong. Why, you act as if you *want* to go down and be married to that Lifeless monster."

"He's not Lifeless," Vivenna said. "Susebron is Returned, and there is a large difference."

"Yes, but he's a false god. Besides, everyone knows what a terrible creature he is."

"But it was my *place* to go and marry him. That is who I am, Fafen. Without it, I am nothing."

"Nonsense," Fafen said. "You'll inherit now, instead of Ridger."

Thereby unsettling the order of things even further, Vivenna thought. *What right do I have to take his place from him?*

She allowed this aspect of the conversation to lapse, however. She'd been arguing the point for several minutes now, and it wouldn't be proper to continue. Proper. Rarely before had Vivenna felt so frustrated at having to be proper. Her emotions were growing rather . . . inconvenient.

"What of Siri?" she found herself saying. "You're happy that this happened to her?"

Fafen looked up, then frowned a little to herself. She had a tendency to avoid thinking things through unless she was confronted with them directly. Vivenna felt a little ashamed for making such a blunt comment, but with Fafen, there often wasn't any other way.

"You do have a point," Fafen said. "I don't see why *anyone* had to be sent."

"The treaty," Vivenna said. "It protects our people."

"Austre protects our people," Fafen said, moving on to another bush.

Will he protect Siri? Vivenna thought. Poor, innocent, capricious Siri. She'd never learned to control herself; she'd be eaten alive in the Hallandren Court of Gods. Siri wouldn't understand the politics, the backstabbing, the false faces and lies. She would also be forced to bear the next God King of Hallandren. Performing that duty was not something Vivenna had looked forward to. It would have been a sacrifice, yet it would have been *her* sacrifice, given willingly for the safety of her people.

Such thoughts continued to pester Vivenna as she and Fafen finished with the berry picking, then moved down the hillside back toward the village. Fafen, like all monks, dedicated all of her work to the good of the people. She watched flocks, harvested food, and cleaned houses for those who could not do it themselves.

Without a duty of her own, Vivenna had little purpose. And yet, as she considered it, there *was* someone who still needed her. Someone who had

left a week before, teary-eyed and frightened, looking to her big sister with desperation.

Vivenna wasn't needed in Idris, whatever her father said. She was useless here. But she *did* know the people, cultures, and society of Hallandren. And—as she followed Fafen onto the village road—an idea began to form in Vivenna's head.

One that was not, by any stretch of the imagination, proper.

3

Lightsong didn't remember dying.

His priests, however, assured him that his death had been extremely inspiring. Noble. Grand. Heroic. One did not Return unless one died in a way that exemplified the great virtues of human existence. That was why the Iridescent Tones sent the Returned back; they acted as examples, and gods, to the people who still lived.

Each god represented something. An ideal related to the heroic way in which they had died. Lightsong himself had died displaying extreme bravery. Or, at least, that was what his priests told him. Lightsong couldn't remember the event, just as he couldn't remember anything of his life before he became a god.

He groaned softly, unable to sleep any longer. He rolled over, feeling weak as he sat up in his majestic bed. Visions and memories pestered his mind, and he shook his head, trying to clear away the fog of sleep.

Servants entered, responding wordlessly to their god's needs. He was one of the younger divinities, for he'd Returned only five years before. There were some two dozen deities in the Court of Gods, and many were far more important—and far more politically savvy—than Lightsong. And above them all reigned Susebron, the God King of Hallandren.

Young though he was, he merited an enormous palace. He slept in a room draped with silks, dyed with bright reds and yellows. His palace held dozens of different chambers, all decorated and furnished according to his

whims. Hundreds of servants and priests saw to his needs—whether he wanted them seen to or not.

All of this, he thought as he stood, *because I couldn't figure out how to die.* Standing made him just a bit dizzy. It was his feast day. He would lack strength until he ate.

Servants approached carrying brilliant red and gold robes. As they entered his aura, each servant—skin, hair, clothing, and garments—burst with exaggerated color. The saturated hues were far more resplendent than any dye or paint could produce. That was an effect of Lightsong's innate BioChroma: he had enough Breath to fill thousands of people. He saw little value in it. He couldn't use it to animate objects or corpses; he was a god, not an Awakener. He couldn't give—or even loan—his deific Breath away.

Well, except once. That would, however, kill him.

The servants continued their ministrations, draping him with gorgeous cloth. Lightsong was a good head and a half taller than anyone else in the room. He was also broad of shoulders, with a muscular physique that he didn't deserve, considering the amount of time he spent idle.

"Did you sleep well, Your Grace?" a voice asked.

Lightsong turned. Llarimar, his high priest, was a tall, portly man with spectacles and a calm demeanor. His hands were nearly hidden by the deep sleeves of his gold and red robe, and he carried a thick tome. Both robes and tome burst with color as they entered Lightsong's aura.

"I slept fantastically, Scoot," Lightsong said, yawning. "A night full of nightmares and obscure dreams, as always. Terribly restful."

The priest raised an eyebrow. "Scoot?"

"Yes," Lightsong said. "I've decided to give you a new nickname. Scoot. Seems to fit you, the way you're always scooting around, poking into things."

"I am honored, Your Grace," Llarimar said, seating himself on a chair.

Colors, Lightsong thought. *Doesn't he ever get annoyed?*

Llarimar opened his tome. "Shall we begin?"

"If we must," Lightsong said. The servants finished tying ribbons, doing up clasps, and draping silks. Each bowed and retreated to a side of the room.

Llarimar picked up his quill. "What, then, do you remember of your dreams?"

"Oh, you know." Lightsong flopped back onto one of his couches, lounging. "Nothing really important."

Llarimar pursed his lips in displeasure. Other servants began to file in, bearing various dishes of food. Mundane, human food. As a Returned, Lightsong didn't really need to eat such things—they would not give him strength or banish his fatigue. They were just an indulgence. In a short time, he would dine on something far more . . . divine. It would give him strength enough to live for another week.

"Please try to remember the dreams, Your Grace," Llarimar said in his polite, yet firm, way. "No matter how unremarkable they may seem."

Lightsong sighed, looking up at the ceiling. It was painted with a mural, of course. This one depicted three fields enclosed by stone walls. It was a vision one of his predecessors had seen. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to focus. "I . . . was walking along a beach," he said. "And a ship was leaving without me. I don't know where it was going."

Llarimar's pen began to scratch quickly. He was probably finding all kinds of symbolism in the memory. "Were there any colors?" the priest asked.

"The ship had a red sail," Lightsong said. "The sand was brown, of course, and the trees green. For some reason, I think the ocean water was red, like the ship."

Llarimar scribbled furiously—he always got excited when Lightsong remembered colors. Lightsong opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling and its brightly colored fields. He reached over idly, plucking some cherries off a servant's plate.

Why should he begrudge the people his dreams? Even if he found divination foolish, he had no right to complain. He was remarkably fortunate. He had a deific BioChromatic aura, a physique that any man would envy, and enough luxury for ten kings. Of all the people in the world, he had the least right to be difficult.

It was just that . . . well, he was probably the world's only god who didn't believe in his own religion.

"Was there anything else to the dream, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked, looking up from his book.

"You were there, Scoot."

Llarimar paused, paling just slightly. "I . . . was?"

Lightsong nodded. "You apologized for bothering me all the time and keeping me from my debauchery. Then you brought me a big bottle of wine and did a dance. It was really quite remarkable."

Llarimar regarded him with a flat stare.

Lightsong sighed. "No, there was nothing else. Just the boat. Even that is fading."

Llarimar nodded, rising and shooing back the servants—though, of course, they remained in the room, hovering with their plates of nuts, wine, and fruit, should any of it be wanted. "Shall we get on with it then, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked.

Lightsong sighed, then rose, exhausted. A servant scuttled forward to redo one of the clasps on his robe, which had come undone as he sat.

Lightsong fell into step beside Llarimar, towering at least a foot over the priest. The furniture and doorways, however, were built to fit Lightsong's increased size, so it was the servants and priests who seemed out of place. They passed from room to room, using no hallways. Hallways were for servants, and they ran in a square around the outside of the building. Lightsong walked on plush rugs from the northern nations, passing the finest pottery from across the Inner Sea. Each room was hung with paintings and gracefully calligraphed poems, created by Hallandren's finest artists.

At the center of the palace was a small, square room that deviated from the standard reds and golds of Lightsong's motif. This one was bright with ribbons of darker colors—deep blues, greens, and blood reds. Each was a true color, directly on hue, as only a person who had attained the Third Heightening could distinguish.

As Lightsong stepped into the room, the colors blazed to life. They became brighter, more intense, yet somehow remained dark. The maroon became a more true maroon, the navy a more powerful navy. Dark yet bright, a contrast only Breath could inspire.

In the center of the room was a child.

Why does it always have to be a child? Lightsong thought.

Llarimar and the servants waited. Lightsong stepped forward, and the little girl glanced to the side, where a couple of priests stood in red and gold robes. They nodded encouragingly. The girl looked back toward Lightsong, obviously nervous.

"Here now," Lightsong said, trying to sound encouraging. "There's nothing to fear."

And yet, the girl trembled.

Lecture after lecture—delivered by Llarimar, who had claimed that they

were *not* lectures, for one did not lecture gods—drifted through Lightsong's head. There was nothing to fear from the Returned gods of the Hallandren. The gods were a blessing. They provided visions of the future, as well as leadership and wisdom. All they needed to subsist was one thing.

Breath.

Lightsong hesitated, but his weakness was coming to a head. He felt dizzy. Cursing himself quietly, he knelt down on one knee, taking the girl's face in his oversized hands. She began to cry, but she said the words, clear and distinct as she had been taught. "My life to yours. My Breath become yours."

Her Breath flowed out, puffing in the air. It traveled along Lightsong's arm—the touch was necessary—and he drew it in. His weakness vanished, the dizziness evaporated. Both were replaced with crisp clarity. He felt invigorated, revitalized, *alive.*

The girl grew dull. The color of her lips and eyes faded slightly. Her brown hair lost some of its luster; her cheeks became more bland.

It's nothing, he thought. *Most people say they can't even tell that their Breath is gone. She'll live a full life. Happy. Her family will be well paid for her sacrifice.*

And Lightsong would live for another week. His aura didn't grow stronger from Breath upon which he fed; that was another difference between a Returned and an Awakener. The latter were sometimes regarded as inferior, man-made approximations of the Returned.

Without a new Breath each week, Lightsong would die. Many Returned outside of Hallandren lived only eight days. Yet with a donated Breath a week, a Returned could continue to live, never aging, seeing visions at night which would supposedly provide divinations of the future. Hence the Court of the Gods, filled with its palaces, where gods could be nurtured, protected, and—most importantly—fed.

Priests hustled forward to lead the girl out of the room. *It is nothing to her,* Lightsong told himself again. *Nothing at all. . . .*

Her eyes met his as she left, and he could see that the twinkle was gone from them. She had become a Drab. A Dull, or a Faded One. A person without Breath. It would never grow back. The priests took her away.

Lightsong turned to Llarimar, feeling guilty at his sudden energy. "All right," he said. "Let's see the Offerings."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow over his bespectacled eyes. "You're accommodating all of a sudden."

I need to give something back, Lightsong thought. *Even if it's something useless.*

They passed through several more rooms of red and gold, most of which were perfectly square with doors on all four sides. Near the eastern side of the palace, they entered a long, thin room. It was completely white, something very unusual in Hallandren. The walls were lined with paintings and poems. The servants stayed outside; only Llarimar joined Lightsong as he stepped up to the first painting.

"Well?" Llarimar asked.

It was a pastoral painting of the jungle, with drooping palms and colorful flowers. There were some of these plants in the gardens around the Court of Gods, which was why Lightsong recognized them. He'd never actually been to the jungle—at least, not during this incarnation of his life.

"The painting is all right," Lightsong said. "Not my favorite. Makes me think of the outside. I wish I could visit."

Llarimar looked at him quizzically.

"What?" Lightsong said. "The court gets old sometimes."

"There isn't much wine in the forest, Your Grace."

"I could make some. Ferment . . . something."

"I'm sure," Llarimar said, nodding to one of his aides outside the room. The lesser priest scribbled down what Lightsong had said about the painting. Somewhere, there was a city patron who sought a blessing from Lightsong. It probably had to do with bravery—perhaps the patron was planning to propose marriage, or maybe he was a merchant about to sign a risky business deal. The priests would interpret Lightsong's opinion of the painting, then give the person an augury—either for good or for ill—along with the exact words Lightsong had said. Either way, the act of sending a painting to the god would gain the patron some measure of good fortune.

Supposedly.

Lightsong moved away from the painting. A lesser priest rushed forward, removing it. Most likely, the patron hadn't painted it himself, but had instead commissioned it. The better a painting was, the better a reaction it tended to get from the gods. One's future, it seemed, could be influenced by how much one could pay one's artist.

I shouldn't be so cynical, Lightsong thought. *Without this system, I'd have died five years ago.*

Five years ago he *had* died, even if he still didn't know what had killed him. Had it really been a heroic death? Perhaps nobody was allowed to talk about his former life because they didn't want anyone to know that Lightsong the Bold had actually died from a stomach cramp.

To the side, the lesser priest disappeared with the jungle painting. It would be burned. Such offerings were made specifically for the intended god, and only he—besides a few of his priests—was allowed to see them. Lightsong moved along to the next work of art on the wall. It was actually a poem, written in the artisan's script. The dots of color brightened as Lightsong approached. The Hallandren artisan's script was a specialized system of writing that wasn't based on form, but on color. Each colored dot represented a different sound in Hallandren's language. Combined with some double dots—one of each color—it created an alphabet that was a nightmare for the colorblind.

Few people in Hallandren would admit to having *that* particular ailment. At least, that was what Lightsong had heard. He wondered if the priests knew just how much their gods gossiped about the outside world.

The poem wasn't a very good one, obviously composed by a peasant who had then paid someone else to translate it to the artisan's script. The simple dots were a sign of this. True poets used more elaborate symbols, continuous lines that changed color or colorful glyphs that formed pictures. A lot could be done with symbols that could change shape without losing their meaning.

Getting the colors right was a delicate art, one that required the Third Heightening or better to perfect. That was the level of Breath at which a person gained the ability to sense perfect hues of color, just as the Second Heightening gave someone perfect pitch. Returned were of the Fifth Heightening. Lightsong didn't know what it was like to live without the ability to instantly recognize exact shades of color and sound. He could tell an ideal red from one that had been mixed with even one drop of white paint.

He gave the peasant's poem as good a review as he could, though he generally felt an impulse to be honest when he looked at Offerings. It seemed his duty, and for some reason it was one of the few things he took seriously.

They continued down the line, Lightsong giving reviews of the various paintings and poems. The wall was remarkably full this day. Was there a feast or celebration he hadn't heard about? By the time they neared the end of the

line, Lightsong was tired of looking at art, though his body—fueled by the child's Breath—continued to feel strong and exhilarated.

He stopped before the final painting. It was an abstract work, a style that was growing more and more popular lately—particularly in paintings sent to him, since he'd given favorable reviews to others in the past. He almost gave this one a poor grade simply because of that. It was good to keep the priests guessing at what would please him, or so some of the gods said. Lightsong sensed that many of them were far more calculating in the way that they gave their reviews, intentionally adding cryptic meanings.

Lightsong didn't have the patience for such tricks, especially since all anyone ever really seemed to want from him was honesty. He gave this last painting the time it deserved. The canvas was thick with paint, every inch colored with large, fat strokes of the brush. The predominant hue was a deep red, almost a crimson, that Lightsong immediately knew was a red-blue mixture with a hint of black in it.

The lines of color overlapped, one atop another, almost in a progression. Kind of like . . . waves. Lightsong frowned. If he looked at it right, it looked like a sea. And could that be a ship in the center?

Vague impressions from his dream returned to him. A red sea. The ship, leaving.

I'm imagining things, he told himself. "Good color," he said. "Nice patterns. It puts me at peace, yet has a tension to it as well. I approve."

Llarimar seemed to like this response. He nodded as the lesser priest—who stood a distance away—recorded Lightsong's words.

"So," Lightsong said. "That's it, I assume?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

One duty left, he thought. Now that Offerings were done, it would be time to move on to the final—and least appealing—of his daily tasks. Petitions. He had to get through them before he could get to more important activities, like taking a nap.

Llarimar didn't lead the way toward the petition hall, however. He simply waved a lesser priest over, then began to flip through some pages on a clipboard.

"Well?" Lightsong asked.

"Well what, Your Grace?"

"Petitions."

Llarimar shook his head. "You aren't hearing petitions today, Your Grace. Remember?"

"No. I have *you* to remember things like that for me."

"Well, then," Llarimar said, flipping a page over, "consider it officially remembered that you have no petitions today. Your priests will be otherwise employed."

"They will?" Lightsong demanded. "Doing what?"

"Kneeling reverently in the courtyard, Your Grace. Our new queen arrives today."

Lightsong froze. *I really need to pay more attention to politics.* "Today?"

"Indeed, Your Grace. Our lord the God King will be married."

"So soon?"

"As soon as she arrives, Your Grace."

Interesting, Lightsong thought. *Susebron getting a wife.* The God King was the only one of the Returned who could marry. Returned couldn't produce children—save, of course, for the king, who had never drawn a breath as a living man. Lightsong had always found the distinction odd.

"Your Grace," Llarimar said. "We will need a Lifeless Command in order to arrange our troops on the field outside the city to welcome the queen."

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. "We plan to attack her?"

Llarimar gave him a stern look.

Lightsong chuckled. "Fledgling fruit," he said, giving up one of the Command phrases that would let others control the city's Lifeless. It wasn't the core Command, of course. The phrase he'd given to Llarimar would allow a person to control the Lifeless only in noncombat situations, and it would expire one day after its first use. Lightsong often thought that the convoluted system of Commands used to control the Lifeless was needlessly complex. However, being one of the four gods to hold Lifeless Commands *did* make him rather important at times.

The priests began to chat quietly about preparations. Lightsong waited, still thinking about Susebron and the impending wedding. He folded his arms and rested against the side of the doorway.

"Scoot?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"Did I have a wife? Before I died, I mean."

Llarimar hesitated. "You know I cannot speak of your life before your Return, Lightsong. Knowledge of your past won't do anyone any good."

Lightsong leaned his head back, resting it against the wall, looking up at the white ceiling. "I . . . remember a face, sometimes," he said softly. "A beautiful, youthful face. I think it might have been her."

The priests hushed.

"Inviting brown hair," Lightsong said. "Red lips, three shades shy of the seventh harmonic, with a deep beauty. Dark tan skin."

A priest scuttled forward with the red tome, and Llarimar started writing furiously. He didn't prompt Lightsong for more information, but simply took down the god's words as they came.

Lightsong fell silent, turning away from the men and their scribbling pens. *What does it matter?* he thought. *That life is gone. Instead, I get to be a god. Regardless of my belief in the religion itself, the perks are nice.*

He walked away, trailed by a retinue of servants and lesser priests who would see to his needs. Offerings done, dreams recorded, and petitions canceled, Lightsong was free to pursue his own activities.

He didn't return to his main chambers. Instead, he made his way out onto his patio deck and waved for a pavilion to be set up for him.

If a new queen was going to arrive today, he wanted to get a good look at her.

4

Siri's carriage rolled to a stop outside of T'Telir, capital of Hallandren. She stared out the window and realized something very, very intimidating: Her people had *no* idea what it meant to be ostentatious. Flowers weren't ostentatious. Ten soldiers protecting a carriage was not ostentatious. Throwing a tantrum in public wasn't ostentatious.

The field of forty thousand soldiers, dressed in brilliant blue and gold, standing in perfect rows, spears raised high with blue tassels flapping in the wind . . . *that* was ostentatious. The twin line of cavalrymen atop enormous, thick-hoofed horses, both men and beasts draped with golden cloth that shimmered in the sun. *That* was ostentatious. The massive city, so large it made her mind numb to consider it, domes and spires and painted walls all competing to draw her attention. *That* was ostentatious.

She'd thought that she was prepared. The carriage had passed through cities as they'd made their way to T'Telir. She'd seen the painted houses, the bright colors and patterns. She'd stayed at inns with plush beds. She'd eaten foods mixed with spices that made her sneeze.

She hadn't been prepared for her reception at T'Telir. Not at all.

Blessed Lord of Colors . . . she thought.

Her soldiers pulled in tight around the carriage, as if wishing they could climb inside and hide from the overwhelming sight. T'Telir was built up against the shore of the Bright Sea, a large but landlocked body of water. She could see it in the distance, reflecting the sunlight, strikingly true to its name.

A figure in blue and silver rode up to her carriage. His deep robes weren't simple, like the monks wore back in Idris. These had massive, peaked shoulders that almost made the costume look like armor. He wore a matching headdress. That, combined with the brilliant colors and complex layers of the robes, made Siri's hair pale to an intimidated white.

The figure bowed. "Lady Sisirinah Royal," the man said in a deep voice, "I am Treledees, high priest of His Immortal Majesty, Susebron the Grand, Returned God and King of Hallandren. You will accept this token honor guard to guide you to the Court of Gods."

Token? Siri thought.

The priest didn't wait for a response, he just turned his horse and started back down the highway toward the city. Her carriage rolled after him, her soldiers marching uncomfortably around the vehicle. The jungle gave way to sporadic bunches of palm trees, and Siri was surprised to see how much sand was mixed with the soil. Her view of the landscape soon grew obstructed by the vast field of soldiers who stood at attention on either side of the road.

"Austre, God of Colors!" one of Siri's guards whispered. "They're Lifeless!"

Siri's hair—which had begun to drift to auburn—snapped back to fearful white. He was right. Under their colorful uniforms, the Hallandren troops were a dull grey. Their eyes, their skin, even their hair: all had been drained completely of color, leaving behind a monochrome.

Those can't be Lifeless! she thought. *They look like men!*

She'd imagined Lifeless as skeletal creatures, the flesh rotting and falling from the bones. They were, after all, men who had died, then been brought back to life as mindless soldiers. But these that she passed looked so human. There was nothing to distinguish them save for their lack of color and the stiff expressions on their faces. That, and the fact that they stood unnaturally motionless. No shuffling, no breathing, no quivers of muscle or limb. Even their eyes were still. They seemed like statues, particularly considering their grey skin.

And . . . I'm going to marry one of these things? Siri thought. But no, Returned were different from Lifeless, and both were different from Drabs, which were people who had lost their Breath. She could vaguely remember a time when someone back in her village had Returned. It had been nearly ten years back, and her father hadn't let her visit the man. She did recall that

he'd been able to speak and interact with his family, even if he hadn't been able to remember them.

He'd died again a week later.

Eventually, her carriage passed through the ranks of Lifeless. The city walls were next; they were immense and daunting, yet they almost looked more artistic than functional. The wall's top was curved in massive half-circles, like rolling hills, and the rim was plated with a golden metal. The gates themselves were in the form of two twisting, lithe sea creatures who curved up in a massive archway. Siri passed through them, and the guard of Hallandren cavalrymen—who appeared to be living men—accompanied her.

She had always thought of Hallandren as a place of death. Her impressions were based on stories told by passing ramblemen or by old women at the winter hearth. They spoke of city walls built from skulls, then painted with sloppy, ugly streaks of color. She'd imagined the buildings inside splattered with different clashing hues. Obscene.

She'd been wrong. True, there *was* an arrogance to T'Telir. Each new wonder seemed as if it wanted to grab her attention and shake her about by her eyes. People lined the street—more people than Siri had seen in her entire life—crowding together to watch her carriage. If there were poor among them, Siri couldn't tell, for they all wore brightly colored clothing. Some did have more exaggerated outfits—probably merchants, since Hallandren was said to have no nobility beyond its gods—but even the simplest of clothing had a cheerful brightness to it.

Many of the painted buildings did clash, but none of it was sloppy. There was a sense of craftsmanship and art to everything from the storefronts, to the people, to the statues of mighty soldiers that frequently stood on corners. It was terribly overwhelming. Garish. A vibrant, enthusiastic garishness. Siri found herself smiling—her hair turning a tentative blond—though she felt a headache coming on.

Maybe . . . maybe this is why Father sent me, Siri thought. *Training or no training, Vivenna would never have fit in here. But I've always been far too interested in color.*

Her father was a good king with good instincts. What if—after twenty years of raising and training Vivenna—he had come to the conclusion that she wasn't the right one to help Idris? Was that why, for the first time in their lives, Father had chosen Siri over Vivenna?

But, if that's true, what am I supposed to do? She knew that her people feared Hallandren would invade Idris, but she couldn't see her father sending one of his daughters if he believed war was close. Perhaps he hoped that she'd be able to help ease the tensions between the kingdoms?

That possibility only added to her anxiety. Duty was something unfamiliar to her, and not a little unsettling. Her father trusted her with the very fate and lives of their people. She couldn't run, escape, or hide.

Particularly from her own wedding.

As her hair twinged white with fear at what was coming, she diverted her attention to the city again. It wasn't hard to let it take her attention. It was enormous, sprawling like a tired beast curled around and over hills. As the carriage climbed the southern section of town, she could see—through gaps in the buildings—that the Bright Sea broke into a bay before the city. T'Telir curved around the bay, running right up to the water, forming a crescent shape. The city wall, then, only had to run in a half-circle, abutting the sea, keeping the city boxed in.

It didn't seem cramped. There was a lot of open space in the city—malls and gardens, large swaths of unused land. Palms lined many of the streets and other foliage was common. Plus, with the cool breeze coming over the sea, the air was a lot more temperate than she had expected. The road led up to a seaside overlook within the city, a small plateau that had an excellent view. Except the entire plateau was surrounded by a large, obstructive wall. Siri watched with growing apprehension as the gates to this smaller city-within-a-city opened up to let the carriage, soldiers, and priests enter.

The common people stayed outside.

There was another wall inside, a barrier to keep anyone from seeing in through the gate. The procession turned left and rounded the blinding wall, entering the Hallandren Court of Gods: an enclosed, lawn-covered courtyard. Several dozen enormous mansions dominated the enclosure, each one painted a distinct color. At the far end of the court was a massive black structure, much taller than the other buildings.

The walled courtyard was quiet and still. Siri could see figures sitting on balconies, watching her carriage roll across the grass. In front of each of the palaces, a crew of men and women knelt prostrate on the grass. The color of their clothing matched that of their building, but Siri spared little time to

study them. Instead, she nervously peered at the large, black structure. It was pyramidal, formed of giant steplike blocks.

Black, she thought. *In a city of color.* Her hair paled even further. She suddenly wished she were more devout. She doubted Austre was all that pleased with her outbursts, and most days she even had trouble naming the Five Visions. But he'd watch over her for the sake of her people, wouldn't he?

The procession pulled to a stop at the base of the enormous triangular building. Siri looked up through the carriage window at the shelves and knobs at the summit, which made the architecture seem top-heavy. She felt as if the dark blocks would come tumbling down in an avalanche to bury her. The priest rode his horse back up to Siri's window. The cavalrymen waited quietly, the shuffling of their beasts the only sound in the massive, open courtyard.

"We have arrived, Vessel," the man said. "As soon as we enter the building, you will be prepared and taken to your husband."

"Husband?" Siri asked uncomfortably. "Won't there be a wedding ceremony?"

The priest smirked. "The God King does not need ceremonial justification. You became his wife the moment he desired it."

Siri shivered. "I was just hoping that maybe I could see him, before, you know . . ."

The priest shot her a harsh look. "The God King does not perform for your whims, woman. You are blessed above all others, for you will be allowed to touch him—if only at *his* discretion. Do not pretend that you are anything other than you are. You have come because he desires it, and you will obey. Otherwise, you will be put aside and another will chosen in your place—which, I think, might bode unfavorably for your rebel friends in the highlands."

The priest turned his horse, then clopped his way toward a large stone ramp, leading up to the building. The carriage lurched into motion, and Siri was drawn toward her fate.

5

This will complicate things, Vasher thought, standing in the shadows atop the wall that enclosed the Court of Gods.

What's wrong? Nightblood asked. *So the rebels actually sent a princess. Doesn't change your plans.*

Vasher waited, watching, as the new queen's carriage crept up the incline and disappeared into the palace's maw.

What? Nightblood demanded. Even after all of these years, the sword reacted like a child in many ways.

She'll be used, Vasher thought. *I doubt we'll be able to get through this without dealing with her.* He hadn't believed that the Idrians would actually send royal blood back to T'Telir. They'd given up a pawn of terrible value.

Vasher turned away from the court, wrapping his sandaled foot around one of the banners that ran down the outside of the wall. Then he released his Breath.

"Lower me," he Commanded.

The large tapestry—woven from wool threads—sucked hundreds of Breaths from him. It hadn't the form of a man, and it was massive in size, but Vasher now had enough Breath to spend in such extravagant Awakenings.

The tapestry twisted, a thing alive, and formed a hand, which picked Vasher up. As always, the Awakening tried to imitate the form of a human—looking closely at the twistings and undulations of the fabric, Vasher could see outlines of muscles and even veins. There was no need for

them; the Breath animated the fabric, and no muscles were necessary for it to move.

The tapestry carefully carried Vasher down, pinching him by one shoulder, placing his feet on the street. "Your Breath to mine," Vasher Commanded. The large banner-tapestry lost its animate form immediately, life vanishing, and it fluttered back against the wall.

Some few people paused in the street, yet they were interested, not awed. This was T'Telir, home of the gods themselves. Men with upward of a thousand Breaths were uncommon, but not unheard of. The people gawked—as peasants in other kingdoms might pause to watch the carriage of a passing lord—but then they moved on with their daily activities.

The attention was unavoidable. Though Vasher still dressed in his usual outfit—ragged trousers, well-worn cloak despite the heat, a rope wrapped several times around his waist for a belt—he now caused colors to brighten dramatically when he was near. The change would be noticeable to normal people and blatantly obvious to those of the First Heightening.

His days of being able to hide and skulk were gone. He'd have to grow accustomed to being noticed again. That was one of the reasons he was glad to be in T'Telir. The city was large enough and filled with enough oddities—from Lifeless soldiers to Awakened objects serving everyday functions—that he probably wouldn't stand out *too* much.

Of course, that didn't take Nightblood into account. Vasher moved through the crowds, carrying the overly heavy sword in one hand, sheathed point nearly dragging on the ground behind him. Some people shied away from the sword immediately. Others watched it, eyes lingering far too long. Perhaps it was time to stuff Nightblood back in the pack.

Oh, no you don't, Nightblood said. *Don't even start thinking about that. I've been locked away for too long.*

What does it matter to you? Vasher thought.

I need fresh air, Nightblood said. *And sunlight.*

You're a sword, Vasher thought, *not a palm tree.*

Nightblood fell silent. He was smart enough to realize that he was not a person, but he didn't like being confronted with that fact. It tended to put him in a sullen mood. That suited Vasher just fine.

He made his way to a restaurant a few streets down from the Court of Gods. This was one thing he *had* missed about T'Telir: restaurants. In most

cities, there were few dining options. If you intended to stay for a while, you hired a local woman to give you meals at her table. If you stayed a short time, you ate what your innkeeper gave you.

In T'Telir, however, the population was large enough—and rich enough—to support dedicated food providers. Restaurants still hadn't caught on in the rest of the world, but in T'Telir, they were commonplace. Vasher already had a booth reserved, and the waiter nodded him to the spot. Vasher settled himself, leaving Nightblood up against the wall.

The sword was stolen within a minute of his letting go of it.

Vasher ignored the thievery, thoughtful as the waiter brought him a warm cup of citrus tea. Vasher sipped at the sweetened liquid, sucking on the bit of rind, wondering why in the world a people who lived in a tropical lowland preferred heated teas. After a few minutes, his life sense warned him that he was being watched. Eventually, that same sense alerted him that someone was approaching. Vasher slipped his dagger from his belt with his free hand as he sipped.

The priest sat down opposite Vasher in the booth. He wore street clothing, rather than religious robes. However—perhaps unconsciously—he had still chosen to wear the white and green of his deity. Vasher slipped his dagger back into its sheath, masking the sound by taking a loud sip.

The priest, Bebid, looked about nervously. He had enough of a Breath aura to indicate that he'd reached the First Heightening. It was where most people—those who could afford to buy Breath—stopped. That much Breath would extend their lifespan by a good decade or so and give them an increased life sense. It would also let them see Breath auras and distinguish other Awakeners, and—in a pinch—let them do a little Awakening themselves. A decent trade for spending enough money to feed a peasant family for fifty years.

"Well?" Vasher asked.

Bebid actually jumped at the sound. Vasher sighed, closing his eyes. The priest was not accustomed to these kinds of clandestine meetings. He wouldn't have come at all, had Vasher not exerted certain . . . pressures on him.

Vasher opened his eyes, staring at the priest as the waiter arrived with two plates of spiced rice. Tektees food was the restaurant's specialty—the Hallandren liked foreign spices as much as they liked odd colors. Vasher had

placed the order earlier, along with a payment that would keep the surrounding booths empty.

"Well?" Vasher repeated.

"I . . ." Bebid said. "I don't know. I haven't been able to find out much."

Vasher regarded the man with a stern stare.

"You have to give me more time."

"Remember your indiscretions, friend," Vasher said, drinking the last of his tea, feeling a twinge of annoyance. "Wouldn't want news of those getting out, would we?" *Do we have to go through this* again*?*

Bebid was quiet for a time. "You don't know what you're asking, Vasher," he said, leaning in. "I'm a priest of Brightvison the True. I can't betray my oaths!"

"Good thing I'm not asking you to."

"We're not supposed to release information about court politics."

"Bah," Vasher snapped. "Those Returned can't so much as *look* at one another without half of the city learning about it within the hour."

"Surely you're not implying—" Bebid said.

Vasher gritted his teeth, bending his spoon with his finger in annoyance. "*Enough,* Bebid! We both know that your oaths are all just part of the game." He leaned in. "And I *really* hate games."

Bebid paled and didn't touch his meal. Vasher eyed his spoon with annoyance, then bent it back, calming himself. He shoveled in a spoonful of rice, mouth burning from the spices. He'd didn't believe in letting food sit around uneaten—you never knew when you'd have to leave in a hurry.

"There have been . . . rumors," Bebid finally said. "This goes beyond simple court politics, Vasher—beyond games played between gods. This is something very real, and *very* quiet. Quiet enough that even observant priests only hear hints of it."

Vasher continued to eat.

"There is a faction of the court pushing to attack Idris," Bebid said. "Though I can't fathom why."

"Don't be an idiot," Vasher said, wishing he had more tea to wash down the rice. "We both know Hallandren has sound reasons to slaughter every person up in those highlands."

"Royals," Bebid said.

Vasher nodded. They were called rebels, but those "rebels" were the true

Hallandren royal family. Mortal men though they might be, their bloodline was a challenge to the Court of Gods. Any good monarch knew that the first thing you did to stabilize your throne was execute anyone who had a better claim to it than you did. After that, it was usually a good idea to execute everyone who *thought* they might have claim.

"So," Vasher said. "You fight, Hallandren wins. What's the problem?"

"It's a bad idea, that's the problem," Bebid said. "A *terrible* idea. Kalad's Phantoms, man! Idris won't go easily, no matter what people in the court say. This won't be like squashing that fool Vahr. The Idrians have allies from across the mountains and the sympathies of dozens of kingdoms. What some are calling a 'simple quelling of rebel factions' could easily spin into another Manywar. Do you want that? Thousands upon thousands dead? Kingdoms falling to never rise again? All so we can grab a little bit of frozen land nobody really wants."

"The trade passes are valuable," Vasher noted.

Bebid snorted. "The Idrians aren't foolish enough to raise their tariffs *too* high. This isn't about money. It's about fear. People in the court talk about what *might* happen if the Idrians cut off the passes or what *may* happen if the Idrians let enemies slip through and besiege T'Telir. If this were about money, we'd never go to war. Hallandren thrives on its dye and textiles trade. You think that business would boom in war? We'd be lucky not to suffer a full economic collapse."

"And you assume that I care about Hallandren's economic well-being?" Vasher asked.

"Ah, yes," Bebid said dryly. "I forgot who I was talking to. What *do* you want, then? Tell me so we can get this over with."

"Tell me about the rebels," Vasher said, chewing on rice.

"The Idrians? We just talked—"

"Not them," Vasher said. "The ones in the city."

"They're unimportant now that Vahr is dead," the priest said with a wave of his hand. "Nobody knows who killed him, by the way. Probably the rebels themselves. Guess they didn't appreciate his getting himself captured, eh?"

Vasher said nothing.

"Is that all you want?" Bebid said impatiently.

"I need to contact the factions you mentioned," Vasher said. "The ones who are pushing for war against Idris."

"I won't help you enrage the—"

"Do *not* presume to tell me what to do, Bebid. Just give me the information you promised, and you can be free of all this."

"Vasher," Bebid said, leaning in even further. "I *can't* help. My lady isn't interested in these kinds of politics, and I move in the wrong circles."

Vasher ate some more, judging the man's sincerity. "All right. Who, then?"

Bebid relaxed, using his napkin to wipe his brow. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe one of Mercystar's priests? You could also try Bluefingers, I suppose."

"Bluefingers? That's an odd name for a god."

"Bluefingers isn't a god," Bebid said, chuckling. "That's just a nickname. He's the High Place steward, head of the scribes. He pretty much keeps the court running; if anyone knows anything about this faction, it will be him. Of course, he's so stiff and straight, you'll have a hard time breaking him."

"You'd be surprised," Vasher said, shoveling the last bit of rice into his mouth. "I got you, didn't I?"

"I suppose."

Vasher stood. "Pay the waiter when you leave," he said, grabbing his cloak off its peg and wandering out. He could feel a . . . darkness to his right. He walked down the street, then turned down an alley, where he found Nightblood—still sheathed—sticking from the chest of the thief who had stolen him. Another cutpurse lay dead on the alley floor.

Vasher pulled the sword free, then snapped the sheath closed—it had only been opened a fraction of an inch—and did up the clasp.

You lost your temper in there for a bit, Nightblood said with a chastising tone. *I thought you were going to work on that.*

Guess I'm relapsing, Vasher thought.

Nightblood paused. *I don't think you ever really unlapsed in the first place.*

That's not a word, Vasher said, leaving the alley.

So? Nightblood said. *You're too worried about words. That priest—you spent all those words on him, then you just let him go. It's not really how I would have handled the situation.*

Yes, I know, Vasher said. *Your way would have involved making several more corpses.*

Well, I am *a sword,* Nightblood said with a mental huff. *Might as well stick to what you're good at. . . .*

LIGHTSONG SAT ON HIS PATIO, watching his new queen's carriage pull up to the palace. "Well, this has been a pleasant day," he remarked to his high priest. A few cups of wine—along with some time to get past thinking about children deprived of their Breath—and he was beginning to feel more like his usual self.

"You're that happy to have a queen?" Llarimar asked.

"I'm that happy to have avoided petitions for the day thanks to her arrival. What do we know about her?"

"Not much, Your Grace," Llarimar said, standing beside Lightsong's chair and looking toward the God King's palace. "The Idrians surprised us by not sending the eldest daughter as planned. They sent the youngest in her stead."

"Interesting," Lightsong said, accepting another cup of wine from one of his servants.

"She's only seventeen years old," Llarimar said. "I can't imagine being married to the God King at her age."

"I can't imagine you being married to the God King at *any* age, Scoot," Lightsong said. Then he pointedly cringed. "Actually, yes I *can* imagine it, and the dress looks painfully inelegant on you. Make a note to have my imagination flogged for its insolence in showing me that particular sight."

"I'll put it in line right behind your sense of decorum, Your Grace," Llarimar said dryly.

"Don't be silly," Lightsong said, taking a sip of wine. "I haven't had one of *those* in years."

He leaned back, trying to decide what the Idrians were signaling by sending the wrong princess. Two potted palms waved in the wind, and Lightsong was distracted by the scent of salt on the incoming sea breeze. *I wonder if I sailed that sea once,* he thought. *A man of the ocean? Is that how I died? Is that why I dreamed of a ship?*

He could only vaguely remember that dream now. A red sea . . .

Fire. Death, killing, and battle. He was shocked as he suddenly remembered his dream in starker, more vivid detail. The sea had been red as it reflected the magnificent city of T'Telir, engulfed in flames. He could almost hear people crying out in pain, he could nearly hear . . . what? Soldiers marching and fighting in the streets?

Lightsong shook his head, trying to dispel the phantom memories. The ship he'd seen in his dream had been burning too, he now remembered. It didn't have to mean anything; everyone had nightmares. But it made him uncomfortable to know that *his* nightmares were seen as prophetic omens.

Llarimar was still standing beside Lightsong's chair, watching the God King's palace.

"Oh, sit down and stop looming over me," Lightsong said. "You're making the buzzards jealous."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. "And which buzzards would that be, Your Grace?"

"The ones who keep pushing for us to go to war," Lightsong said waving a hand.

The priest sat down on one of the patio's wooden recliners and relaxed as he sat, removing the bulky miter from his head. Underneath, Llarimar's dark hair was plastered to his head with sweat. He ran his hand through it. During the first few years, Llarimar had remained stiff and formal at all the times. Eventually, however, Lightsong had worn him down. After all, Lightsong was the god. In his opinion, if he could lounge on the job, then so could his priests.

"I don't know, Your Grace," Llarimar said slowly, rubbing his chin. "I don't like this."

"The queen's arrival?" Lightsong asked.

Llarimar nodded. "We haven't had a queen in the court for some thirty years. I don't know how the factions will deal with her."

Lightsong rubbed his forehead. "Politics, Llarimar? You know I frown on such things."

Llarimar eyed him. "Your Grace, you are—by default—a politician."

"Don't remind me, please. I should very well like to extract myself from the situation. Do you think, perhaps, I could bribe one of the other gods to take control of my Lifeless Commands?"

"I doubt that would be wise," Llarimar said.

"It's all part of my master plan to insure that I become totally and redundantly useless to this city by the time I die. Again."

Llarimar cocked his head. "Redundantly useless?"

"Of course. Regular uselessness wouldn't be enough—I am, after all, a god." He took a handful of grapes from a servant's tray, still trying to dismiss his dream's disturbing images. They didn't mean anything. Just dreams.

Even so, he decided he would tell Llarimar about them the next morning. Perhaps Llarimar could use the dreams to help push for peace with Idris. If old Dedelin hadn't sent his firstborn daughter, it would mean more debates in the court. More talk of war. This princess's arrival should have settled it, but knew that the war hawks among the gods would not let the issue die.

"Still," Llarimar said, as if talking to himself. "They did send *someone.* That is a good sign, surely. An outright refusal would have meant war for certain."

"And whoever Certain is, I doubt we should have a war for him," Lightsong said idly, inspecting a grape. "War is, in my divine opinion, even worse than politics."

"Some say the two are the same, Your Grace."

"Nonsense. War is far worse. At least where politics is going on, there are usually nice hors d'oeuvres."

As usual, Llarimar ignored Lightsong's witty remarks. Lightsong would have been offended if he hadn't known there were three separate lesser priests standing at the back of the patio, recording his words, searching for wisdom and meaning within them.

"What will the Idrian rebels do now, do you think?" Llarimar asked.

"Here's the thing, Scoot," Lightsong said, leaning back, closing his eyes and feeling the sun on his face. "The Idrians don't consider themselves to be rebels. They're not sitting up in their hills, waiting for the day when they can return in triumph to Hallandren. This isn't their home anymore."

"Those peaks are hardly a kingdom."

"They're enough of a kingdom to control the area's best mineral deposits, four vital passes to the north, and the original royal line of the original Hallandren dynasty. They don't need us, my friend."

"And the talk of Idrian dissidents in the city, ones rousing the people against the Court of Gods?"

"Rumors only," Lightsong said. "Though, when I'm proven wrong and the underprivileged masses storm my palace and burn me at the stake, I'll be sure to inform them that you were right all along. You'll get the last laugh. Or . . . well, the last scream, since you'll probably be tied up beside me."

Llarimar sighed, and Lightsong opened his eyes to find the priest regarding him with a contemplative expression. The priest didn't chastise Lightsong for his levity. Llarimar just reached down, putting his headdress back on. He was the priest; Lightsong was the god. There would be no questioning of motives, no rebukes. If Lightsong gave an order, they would all do exactly as he said.

Sometimes, that terrified him.

But not this day. He was, instead, annoyed. The queen's arrival had somehow gotten him talking about politics—and the day had been going so well until then.

"More wine," Lightsong said, raising his cup.

"You can't get drunk, Your Grace," Llarimar noted. "Your body is immune to all toxins."

"I know," Lightsong said as a lesser servant filled his cup. "But trust me—I'm *quite* good at pretending."

6

Siri stepped from the carriage. Immediately, dozens of servants in blue and silver swarmed around her, pulling her away. Siri turned, alarmed, looking back toward her soldiers. The men stepped forward, but Treledees held up his hand.

"The Vessel will go alone," the priest declared.

Siri felt a stab of fear. This was the time. "Return to Idris," she said to the men.

"But, my lady—" the lead soldier said.

"No," Siri said. "You can do nothing more for me here. Please, return and tell my father that I arrived safely."

The lead soldier glanced back at his men, uncertain. Siri didn't get to see if they obeyed or not, for the servants shuffled her around a corner into a long, black hallway. Siri tried not to show her fear. She'd come to the palace to be wed, and was determined to make a favorable impression on the God King. But she really was just terrified. Why hadn't she run? Why hadn't she wiggled out of this somehow? Why couldn't they have all just let her be?

There was no escape now. As the serving women led her down a corridor into the deep black palace, the last remnants of her former life disappeared behind her.

She was now alone.

Lamps with colored glass lined the walls. Siri was led through several twists and turns in the dark passages. She tried to remember her way back,

but was soon hopelessly lost. The servants surrounded her like an honor guard; though all were female, they were of different ages. Each wore a blue cap, hair loose out the back, and they kept their eyes downcast. Their shimmering blue clothing was loose-fitting, even through the bust. Siri blushed at the low-cut fronts. In Idris, women kept even their necks covered.

The black corridor eventually opened into a much larger room. Siri hesitated in the doorway. While the stone walls of this room were black, they had been draped in silks of a deep maroon. In fact, *everything* in the room was maroon, from the carpeting, to the furniture, to the tubs—surrounded by tile—in the center of the room.

The servants began to pick at her clothing, undressing her. Siri jumped, swatting at a few hands, causing them to pause in surprise. Then they attacked with renewed vigor, and Siri realized that she didn't have a choice except to grit her teeth and bear the treatment. She raised her arms, letting the servants pull off her dress and underclothing, and felt her hair grow red as she blushed. At least the room was warm.

She shivered anyway. She was forced to stand, naked, as other servants approached, bearing measuring tapes. They poked and prodded, getting various measurements, including ones around Siri's waist, bust, shoulders, and hips. When that was finished, the women backed away, and the room fell still. The bath continued to steam in the center of the chamber. Several of the serving women gestured toward it.

Guess I'm allowed to wash myself, Siri thought with relief, walking up the tile steps. She stepped carefully into the massive tub, and was pleased at how warm the water was. She lowered herself into the water, letting herself relax just a fraction.

Soft splashes sounded behind her, and she spun. Several other serving women—these wearing brown—were climbing into the tub, fully clothed, holding washcloths and soap. Siri sighed, yielding herself to their care as they began to scrub vigorously at her body and hair. She closed her eyes, enduring the treatment with as much dignity as she could manage.

That left her time to think, which was not good. It only allowed her to consider just what was happening to her. Her anxiety immediately returned.

The Lifeless weren't as bad as the stories, she thought, trying to reassure herself. *And the city colors are far more pleasant than I expected. Maybe . . . maybe the God King isn't as terrible as everyone says.*

"Ah, good," a voice said. "We're right on schedule. Perfect."

Siri froze. That was a *man's* voice. She snapped her eyes open to find an older man in brown robes standing beside the tub, writing something on a ledger. He was balding and had a round, pleasant face. A young boy stood next to him, bearing extra sheets of paper and a small jar of ink for the man to use in dipping his quill.

Siri screamed, startling several of her servants as she moved with a sudden splashing motion, covering herself with her arms.

The man with the ledger hesitated, looking down. "Is something wrong, Vessel?"

"I'm *bathing,*" she snapped.

"Yes," the man said. "I believe I can tell that."

"Well, why are you *watching*?"

The man cocked his head. "But I'm a royal servant, far beneath your station . . ." he said, then trailed off. "Ah, yes. Idris sensibilities. I had forgotten. Ladies, please splash around, make some more bubbles in the bath."

The serving women did as asked, churning up an abundance of foam in the soapy water.

"There," the man said, turning back to his ledger. "I can't see a thing. Now, let us get on with this. It would not do to keep the God King waiting on his wedding day!"

Siri reluctantly allowed the bathing to continue, though she was careful to keep certain bits of anatomy well beneath the water. The women worked furiously, scrubbing so hard that Siri was half-afraid they'd rub her skin right off.

"As you might guess," the man said, "we're on a *very* tight schedule. There's much to do, and I would like this all to go as smoothly as possible."

Siri frowned. "And . . . who exactly are you?"

The man glanced at her, causing her to duck down beneath the suds a little more. Her hair was as bright a red as it had ever been.

"My name is Havarseth, but everyone just calls me Bluefingers." He held up a hand and wiggled the fingers, which were all stained dark with blue ink from writing. "I am head scribe and steward to His Excellent Grace Susebron, God King of Hallandren. In simpler terms, I manage the palace attendants and oversee all servants in the Court of Gods."

He paused, eyeing her. "I also make certain that everyone stays on schedule and does what they are supposed to."

Some of the younger girls—wearing brown, like the ones bathing Siri—began bringing pitchers of water to the side of the tub, and the women used these to rinse Siri's hair. She turned about to let them, though she tried to keep a waterlogged eye on Bluefingers and his serving boy.

"Now," Bluefingers said. "The palace tailors are working very quickly on your gown. We had a good estimate of your size, but final measurements were necessary to complete the process. We should have the garment ready for you in a short time."

The serving women dowsed Siri's head again.

"There are some things we need to discuss," Bluefingers continued, voice distorted by the water in Siri's ears. "I presume you have been taught the proper method of treating His Immortal Majesty?"

Siri glanced at him, then looked away. She probably *had* been taught, but she didn't remember—and either way, she wasn't in a frame of mind to concentrate.

"Ah," Bluefingers said, apparently reading her expression. "Well then, this could be . . . interesting. Allow me to give you some suggestions."

Siri nodded.

"First, please understand that the God King's will is law. He needs no reason or justification for what he does. Your life, like all of our lives, is in his hands. Second, please understand that the God King does not speak with people such as you or me. You will not talk to him when you go to him. Do you understand?"

Siri spit out a bit of soapy water. "You mean I'm not even to be able to *speak* to my husband?"

"I'm afraid not," Bluefingers said. "None of us can."

"Then how does he make judgments and rulings?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"The Council of Gods handles the kingdom's more mundane needs," Bluefingers explained. "The God King is above the day-to-day governance. When it *is* necessary for him to communicate, he gives his judgments to his priests, who then reveal them to the world."

Great, Siri thought.

"It is unconventional that you are allowed to touch him," Bluefingers continued. "Fathering a child is a necessary encumbrance for him. It is our job to present you in as pleasing a way as possible, and to avoid—at all costs—irritating him."

Austre, God of Colors, she thought. *What kind of creature is this?*

Bluefingers eyed her. "I know something of your temperament, Vessel," he said. "We have, of course, researched the children of the Idrian monarchy. Allow me to be a little more personal, and perhaps a little more direct, than I would prefer. If you speak directly to the God King, he will order you executed. Unlike your father, he is not a man of patience.

"I cannot stress this point enough. I realize that you are accustomed to being a very important person. Indeed, you still *are* that important—if not more so. You are far above myself and these others. However, as far as you are above us, the God King is even *farther* above you.

"His Immortal Majesty is . . . special. The doctrines teach that the earth itself is too base for him. He is one who achieved transcendence before he was even born, but then Returned to bring his people blessings and visions. You are being given a special trust. Please, do not betray it—and please, *please* do not provoke his anger. Do you understand?"

Siri nodded slowly, feeling her hair bleach back to white. She tried to steel herself, but what courage she could gather felt like a sham. No, she wasn't going to be able to stomach this creature as easily as the Lifeless or the city colors. His reputation in Idris wasn't exaggerated. In a short time, he was going to take her body and do with it as he wished. Part of her felt a rage at that—but it was the rage of frustration. The rage that came from knowing that something horrible was coming, and from being unable to do anything at all about it.

The serving women backed away from her, leaving her half-floating in the soapy water. One of the servants looked to Bluefingers and nodded her head in respect.

"Ah, finished are we?" he asked. "Excellent. You and your ladies are efficient, as always, Jlan. Let us proceed, then."

"Can't they speak?" Siri asked quietly.

"Of course they can," Bluefingers said. "But they are dedicated servants of His Immortal Majesty. During their hours of service, their duty is to be as useful as possible without being distracting. Now, if you'll continue . . ."

Siri stayed in the water, even when the silent women tried to pull her

out. Bluefingers turned around with a sigh, putting his back to her. He reached over and turned the serving boy around as well.

Siri finally allowed herself to be led out of the bath. The wet women left her, walking into a side room—probably to change—and several others led Siri toward a smaller tub for rinsing. She stepped down into the water, which was much colder than the other bath, and gasped. The women motioned for her to dunk, and she cringed, but did so, cleaning off most of the soap. After that, there was a final, third tub. As Siri approached, shivering, she could smell strong floral scents coming from it.

"What's this?" Siri asked.

"Perfumed bath," Bluefingers said, still turned away. "If you prefer, you may have one of the palace masseuses rub perfume onto your body instead. I advise against that, however, considering time restraints. . . ."

Siri blushed, imagining anyone—male or female—rubbing her body with perfume. "This will be fine," she said, climbing down into the water. It was lukewarm, and the floral scents were so strong that she had to breathe through her mouth.

The women motioned downward, and—sighing—Siri dunked beneath the scented water. After that, she climbed out, and several women finally approached with fluffy towels. They began to pat Siri down, their touch as delicate and soft as the previous scrubbing had been hard. This took away some of the strong scent, for which Siri was glad. Other women approached with a deep blue robe, and she extended her arms, allowing them to put it on her, then tie it shut. "You may turn around," she told the steward.

"Excellent," Bluefingers said, doing so. He strode toward a door at the side of the room, waving for her. "Quickly, now. We still have much to do."

Siri and the serving women followed, leaving the maroon room for one that was decorated in bright yellows. It held a lot more furniture, no bath, and a large plush chair in the center of the room.

"His Majesty is associated with no single hue," Bluefingers said, waving to the bright colors of the room as the women led Siri to the plush chair. "He represents all colors and each of the Iridescent Tones. Therefore, each room is decorated with a different shade."

Siri sat, and the women began to work on her nails. Another tried to brush out the snarls that had come from the hearty washing. Siri frowned. "Just cut it off," she said.

They hesitated. "Vessel?" one asked.

"Cut off the hair," she said.

Bluefingers gave them permission, and a few snips later, her hair was in a bunch on the floor. Then Siri closed her eyes and focused.

She wasn't certain how she did it. The Royal Locks had always been part of her life; altering them was like moving any other muscle to her, if more difficult. In a few moments, she was able to get the hair to grow.

Several women gasped softly as the hair sprouted from Siri's head and moved down to her shoulders. Growing it made her feel hungry and tired, but it was better than letting the women fight snarls. Finished, she opened her eyes.

Bluefingers was watching her with an inquisitive expression, his ledger held loosely in his fingers. "That is . . . fascinating," he said. "The Royal Locks. We have waited quite some time for them to grace the palace again, Vessel. You can change the color at will?"

"Yes," Siri said. *Some of the time, at least.* "Is it too long?"

"Long hair is seen as a sign of beauty in Hallandren, my lady," Bluefingers said. "I know you keep it bound up in Idris, but here, flowing hair is favored by many of the women—particularly the goddesses."

Part of her wanted to keep the hair short just out of spite, but she was beginning to realize that such an attitude could get her killed in Hallandren. Instead, she closed her eyes and focused again. The hair had been shoulder length, but she extended it for several minutes, making it grow until it would reach all the way down her back once she stood.

Siri opened her eyes.

"Beautiful," one of the younger serving women whispered, then flushed, immediately returning to her work on Siri's toenails.

"Very nice," Bluefingers agreed. "I will leave you here—I have a few things to deal with—but will return shortly."

Siri nodded as he left, and several women moved in and began to apply makeup. Siri suffered it pensively, others still working on her nails and hair. This wasn't how she had imagined her wedding day. Marriage had always seemed distant to her, something that would only happen after spouses had been chosen for her siblings. When she'd been very young, in fact, she'd always said that she intended to raise horses instead of getting married.

She'd grown out of that, but a part of her felt a longing for such simple

times. She *didn't* want to be married. Not yet. She still felt like a child, even if her body had become that of a woman. She wanted to play in the hills and pick flowers and tease her father. She wanted time to experience more of life before she was forced into the responsibilities of childbearing.

Fate had taken that opportunity away from her. Now she was faced by the imminent prospect of going to a man's bed. A man who wouldn't speak to her, and who wouldn't care who she was or what she wanted. She knew the physical requirements of what would be involved—she could thank Mab the cook for some candid discussions on that point—but emotionally, she just felt petrified. She wanted to run, hide, flee as far as she could.

Did all women feel this way, or was it only those who were being washed, primped, and sent to please a deity with the power to destroy nations?

Bluefingers eventually returned. Another person entered behind him, an elderly man in the blue and silver clothing Siri was beginning to associate with those who served the God King.

But . . . Bluefingers wears brown, Siri thought, frowning. *Why is that?*

"Ah, I see that my timing is perfect," Bluefingers said as the women finished. They retreated to the sides of the room, heads bowed.

Bluefingers nodded to the elderly man. "Vessel, this is one of the palace healers. Before you are taken to the God King, you will need to be inspected to determine if you are a maiden and to insure that you don't have certain diseases. It's really just a formality, but one that I'm afraid I must insist upon. In consideration of your bashfulness, I did not bring the young healer I had originally assigned to the job. I assume an older healer will make you more comfortable?"

Siri sighed, but nodded. Bluefingers gestured toward a padded table on the side of the room; then he and his serving boy turned around. Siri undid her robe and went to the table, lying down to continue what was proving to be the most embarrassing day of her life.

It will only get worse, she thought as the doctor did his examination.

Susebron, the God King. Awesome, terrible, holy, majestic. He had been stillborn, but had Returned. What did that do to a man? Would he even be human, or would he be some monster, terrible to behold? He was said to be eternal, but obviously his reign would end eventually, otherwise he wouldn't need an heir.

She shivered, wishing it could just be over with, but also grateful for

anything that delayed matters for just a little longer, even something as humiliating as the doctor's prodding. That was soon done, however, and Siri quickly did up her robe again, standing.

"She is quite healthy," the healer said to Bluefingers. "And most likely still a maiden. She also has a very strong Breath."

Siri froze. How could he tell . . .

And then she saw it. She had to look very closely, but the yellow floor around the surgeon looked a tad too bright. She felt herself pale, though the nervousness had already made her hair as white as it went.

The doctor is an Awakener, she thought. *There is an Awakener here, in this room. And he touched me.*

She cringed, skin writhing. It was wrong to take the Breath from another person. It was the ultimate in arrogance, the complete opposite of Idris philosophy. Others in Hallandren simply wore bright colors to draw attention to themselves, but Awakeners . . . they stole the life from human beings, and used *that* to make themselves stand out.

The perverted use of Breath was one of the main reasons that the Royal line had moved to the highlands in the first place. Modern-day Hallandren existed on the basis of extorting the Breath of its people. Siri felt more naked now than she had when actually unclothed. What could this Awakener tell about her, because of his unnatural life force? Was he tempted to steal Siri's BioChroma? She tried to breathe as shallowly as possible, just in case.

Eventually, Bluefingers and the terrible doctor left the room. The women approached to undo her robe once again, some bearing undergarments.

He will be worse, she realized. *The king. He's not just an Awakener, he's Returned. He needs to suck the Breath from people in order to survive.*

Would he take away her Breath?

No, that won't happen, she told herself firmly. *He needs me to provide him with an heir of the royal line. He won't risk the child's safety. He'll leave me my Breath, if only until then.*

But . . . what would happen to her when she was no longer needed?

Her attention was drawn away from such thoughts as several serving women approached with a large bundle of cloth. A dress. No, a gown—a gorgeous gown of blue and silver. Focusing on it seemed better than thinking about what the God King would do with her once she bore him a son.

Siri waited quietly as the women put it on her. The fabric was amazingly

soft on her skin, the velvet smooth as petals from a highland flower. As the women adjusted it on her, she noticed that—oddly—it laced up the side instead of the back. It had an extremely long train and sleeves that were so long that if she put her arms down at the sides, the cuffs hung a good foot below her hands. It took several minutes for the women to get the ties done up right, the folds situated correctly, and the train even behind her. *All this so that it can be taken off again in a few minutes,* Siri thought with a detached sense of cold irony as a woman approached with a mirror.

Siri froze.

Where had all that color come from? The delicately red cheeks, the mysteriously dark eyes, the blue on the top of her eyelids? The deep red lips, the almost glowing skin? The gown shone silver upon blue, bulky yet beautiful, with ripples of deep, velvet cloth.

It was like nothing she'd seen in Idris. It was more amazing, even, than the colors she'd seen on the people in the city. Staring at herself in the mirror, Siri was almost able to forget her worries. "Thank you," she whispered.

That must have been the right response, for the serving women smiled, glancing at each other. Two took her hands, moving much more respectfully now than when they'd first rushed her from the carriage. Siri strode with them, train rustling behind her, and the other women stayed behind. Siri turned, and the women curtsied to her one at a time, heads bowed.

The last two—the ones leading her—opened a door, then gently pushed her out into the hallway beyond. They closed the door, leaving her.

The hallway was of the deepest black. She'd almost forgotten how dark the stone walls of the palace were. The hallway was empty, save for Bluefingers, who stood waiting for her with his ledger. He smiled, bowing his head in respect. "The God King will be pleased, Vessel," he said. "We are exactly on time—the sun only just set."

Siri turned from Bluefingers. Directly across from her was a large, imposing door. It was plated entirely with gold. Four wall lamps shone without colored glass, and they reflected light off the gilded portal. She had no question as to who lay beyond such an impressive entrance.

"This is the God King's sleeping chambers," Bluefingers said. "Rather, *one* of his sleeping chambers. Now, my lady, you *must* hear this again. Do nothing to offend the king. You are here at *his* sufferance, and are here to see to *his* needs. Not mine, not your own, and not even that of our kingdom."

"I understand," she said quietly, heart beating faster and faster.

"Thank you," Bluefingers said. "It is time to present yourself. Enter the room, then remove your dress and underclothing. Bow yourself to the ground before the king's bed, touching your head to the floor. When he wishes for you to approach, he will knock on the side post, and you may look up. He will then wave you forward."

She nodded.

"Just . . . try not to touch him too much."

Siri frowned, clenching and unclenching her increasingly nervous hands. "How exactly am I going to manage *that*? We're going to have sex, aren't we?"

Bluefingers flushed. "Yes, I guess you are. This is new ground for me too, my lady. The God King . . . well, only a group of specially dedicated servants are supposed to touch him. My suggestion would be to avoid kissing him, caressing him, or doing anything else that might offend him. Simply let him do to you what he wishes, and you should be safe."

Siri took a deep breath, nodding.

"When you are finished," Bluefingers said, "the king will withdraw. Take the bed linens and burn them in the hearth. As the Vessel, you are the only one allowed to handle such things. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Siri said, growing increasingly anxious.

"Very well then," Bluefingers said, looking almost as nervous as she was. "Good luck." With that, he reached forward and pushed the door open.

Oh, Austre, God of Colors, she thought, heart pounding, hands sweating, growing numb.

Bluefingers pushed her lightly on the back, and she stepped into the room.

7

The door shut behind her.

A large fire growled in a hearth to her left, bringing a shifting orange light to the large room. The black walls seemed to draw in and absorb the illumination, making deep shadows at the edges of the room.

Siri stood quietly in her ornate velvet dress, heart thumping, brow sweating. To her right, she could make out a massive bed, with sheets and covers of black to match the rest of the room. The bed appeared unoccupied. Siri peered into the darkness, eyes adjusting.

The fire crackled, throwing a flicker of light across a large, thronelike chair sitting beside the bed. It was occupied by a figure wearing black, bathed in darkness. He watched her, eyes twinkling, unblinking in the firelight.

Siri gasped, casting her eyes downward, her heartbeat surging as she remembered Bluefingers's warnings. *Vivenna should be here instead of me,* Siri thought desperately. *I can't deal with this! Father was wrong to send me!*

She squeezed her eyes shut, her breathing coming more quickly. She worked shaking fingers and pulled nervously at the strings on the side of her dress. Her hands were slick with sweat. Was she taking too long to undress? Would he be angered? Would she be killed before even the first night was out?

Would she, perhaps, prefer that?

No, she thought with determination. *No. I need to do this. For Idris. For*

the fields and the children who took flowers from me. For my father and Mab and everyone else in the palace.

She finally got the strings undone, and the gown fell away with surprising ease—she could now see that it had been constructed with that goal in mind. She dropped the dress to the floor, then paused, looking at her undershift. The white fabric was throwing out a spectrum of colors, like light bent by a prism. She regarded this with shock, wondering what was causing the strange effect.

It didn't matter. She was too nervous to think about that. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to pull off her undershift, leaving her naked. She quickly knelt on the cold stone floor, curling up, heart thudding in her ears as she bowed with her forehead touching the floor.

The room fell silent save for the crackling hearth. The fire wasn't necessary in the Hallandren warmth, but she was glad for it, unclothed as she was.

She waited, hair pure white, arrogance and stubbornness discarded, naked in more than one way. This was where she ended up—this was where all her "independent" sense of freedom came to an end. No matter what she claimed or how she felt, in the end, she had to bow to authority. Just like anyone else.

She gritted her teeth, imagining the God King sitting there, watching her be subservient and naked before him. She hadn't seen much of him, other than to notice his size—he was a good foot taller than most other men she'd seen, and was wider of shoulders and more powerful of build as well. More significant than other, lesser men.

He was Returned.

In and of itself, being Returned wasn't a sin. After all, Returned came in Idris, too. The Hallandren people, however, kept the Returned alive, feeding them on the souls of peasants, tearing away the Breath of hundreds of people each year. . . .

Don't think of that, Siri told herself forcefully. Yet as she tried to clear her thoughts, the God King's eyes returned to her memory. Those black eyes, which had seemed to glow in the firelight. She could feel them on her still, watching her, as cold as the stones upon which she knelt.

The fire crackled. Bluefingers had said that the king would knock for her. What if she missed it? She didn't dare glance upward. She'd already met his gaze once, if by accident. She couldn't risk upsetting him further.

She just continued to kneel in place, elbows on the ground, back beginning to ache.

Why doesn't he do something?

Was he displeased with her? Was she not as pretty as he'd desired, or was he angered that she'd met his eyes then taken too long to undress? It would be particularly ironic if she offended him when trying so hard not to be her usual flippant self. Or was something else wrong? He had been promised the eldest daughter of the Idrian king, but had instead received Siri. Would he know the difference? Would he even care?

The minutes passed, the room growing darker as the fire consumed its logs.

He's toying with me, Siri thought. *Forcing me to wait on his whims.* Making her kneel in such an uncomfortable position was probably a message—one that showed who was in power. He would take her when *he* willed it, and not before.

Siri gritted her teeth as the time passed. How long had she been kneeling? An hour, maybe longer. And still, there wasn't a hint of sound—no knock, no cough, not even a shuffle from the God King. Perhaps it was a test to see how long she would remain as she was. Perhaps she was just reading too much into things. Either way, she forced herself to remain in place, shifting only when she absolutely had to.

Vivenna had the training. Vivenna had the poise and the refinement. But Siri, she had the stubbornness. One only had to look back at her history of repeatedly ignoring lessons and duties to appreciate that. With time, she'd even broken down her father. He'd started letting her do as she pleased, if only to save his own sanity.

And so she continued to wait—naked in the light of the coals—as the night wore on.

Fireworks sprayed sparks upward in a fountain of light. Some fell close to where Lightsong was sitting, and these blazed with an extra, frenzied light until they died away.

He reclined on a couch in the open air, watching the display. Servants waited around him, complete with parasols, a portable bar, steaming and

chilled towels to rub his face and hands should he feel the need, and a host of other luxuries that—to Lightsong—were simply commonplace.

He watched the fireworks with mild interest. The firemasters stood in a nervous cluster near his position. Beside them were a troop of minstrels that Lightsong had called for, but hadn't yet asked to perform. While there were always entertainers in the Court of Gods for the Returned to enjoy, this night—the wedding night of their God King—was even more extravagant.

Susebron wasn't in attendance himself, of course. Such festivities were beneath him. Lightsong glanced to the side, where the king's palace rose soberly above the court. Eventually, Lightsong just shook his head and turned his attention back to the courtyard. The palaces of the gods formed a ring, and each building had a patio below and a balcony above, both facing the central area. Lightsong sat a short distance from his patio, out amidst the lush grass of the expansive courtyard.

Another firefountain sprayed into the air, throwing shadows across the courtyard. Lightsong sighed, accepting another fruit drink from a servant. The night was cool and pleasant, fit for a god. Or gods. Lightsong could see others set up in front of their palaces. Different groups of performers cluttered the sides of the courtyard, waiting for their chance to please one of the Returned.

The fountain ran low, and the firemasters looked toward him, smiling hopefully in the torchlight. Lightsong nodded with his best benevolent expression. "More fireworks," he said. "You have pleased me." This caused the three men to whisper in excitement and wave for their assistants.

As they set up, a familiar figure wandered into Lightsong's ring of torches. Llarimar wore his priestly robes, as always. Even when he was out in the city—which was where he should have been this night—he represented Lightsong and his priesthood.

"Scoot?" Lightsong asked, sitting up.

"Your Grace," Llarimar said, bowing. "Are you enjoying the festivities?"

"Certainly. You might say I'm positively in*fested*. But what are you doing here in the court? You should be out with your family."

"I just wanted to make certain everything was to your liking."

Lightsong rubbed his forehead. "You're giving me a headache, Scoot."

"You can't get headaches, Your Grace."

"So you're fond of telling me," Lightsong said. "I assume the revelry outside the Holy Prison is nearly as amazing as what we have here inside?"

Llarimar frowned at Lightsong's dismissive reference to the divine compound. "The party in the city is fantastic, Your Grace. T'Telir hasn't seen a festival this grand in decades."

"Then I repeat that you should be out enjoying it."

"I just—"

"Scoot," Lightsong said, giving the man a pointed look, "if there's *one* thing you can trust me to do competently on my own, it's enjoy myself. I will—I promise in all solemnity—have a ravishingly good time drinking to excess and watching these nice men light things on fire. Now go be with your family."

Llarimar paused, then stood, bowed, and withdrew.

That man, Lightsong thought, sipping his fruity drink, *takes his work far too seriously.*

The concept amused Lightsong, and he leaned back, enjoying the fireworks. However, he was soon distracted by the approach of someone else. Or, rather, one very important someone else leading a group of far less important someone elses. Lightsong sipped his drink again.

The newcomer was beautiful. She was a goddess, after all. Glossy black hair, pale skin, lushly curvaceous body. She wore far less clothing than Lightsong did, but that was typical of the court's goddesses. Her thin gown of green and silver silk was split on both sides, showing hips and thighs, and the neckline was draped so low that very little was left to imagination.

Blushweaver the Beautiful, goddess of honesty.

This should be interesting, Lightsong thought, smiling to himself.

She was trailed by about thirty servants, not to mention her high priestess and six lesser priests. The firemasters grew excited, realizing that they now had not one, but two divine observers. Their apprentices scurried about in a flurry of motion, setting up another series of firefountains. A group of Blushweaver's servants rushed forward, carrying an ornate couch, which they set on the grass beside Lightsong.

Blushweaver lay down with customary lithe grace, crossing perfect legs and resting on her side in a seductive yet ladylike pose. The orientation left her able to watch the fireworks should she wish, but her attention was obviously focused on Lightsong.

"My dear Lightsong," she said as a servant approached with a bunch of grapes. "Aren't you even going to greet me?"

Here we go, Lightsong thought. "My dear Blushweaver," he said, setting aside his cup and lacing his fingers before him. "Why would I go and do something rude like that?"

"Rude?" she asked, amused.

"Of course. You obviously make quite a determined effort to draw attention to yourself—the details are magnificent, by the way. Is that makeup on your thighs?"

She smiled, biting into a grape. "It's a kind of paint. The designs were drawn by some of the most talented artists in my priesthood."

"My compliments to them," Lightsong said. "Regardless, you ask why I did not greet you. Well, let us assume that I had acted as you suggest I should. Upon your approach, you would have had me gush over you?"

"Naturally."

"You would have me point out how stunning you appear in that gown?"

"I wouldn't complain."

"Mention how your dazzling eyes glisten in the fireworks like burning embers?"

"That would be nice."

"Expound on how your lips are so perfectly red that they could leave any man breathless with wonder, yet drive him compose the most brilliant of poetry each time he recalled the moment?"

"I'd be flattered for certain."

"And you claim you want these reactions from me?"

"I do."

"Well blast it, woman," Lightsong said, picking up his cup. "If I'm stunned, dazzled, and breathless, then how the hell am I supposed to *greet* you? By definition, won't I be struck dumb?"

She laughed. "Well, then, you've obviously found your tongue now."

"Surprisingly, it was in my mouth," he said. "I always forget to check there."

"But isn't that where it is expected to be?"

"My dear," he said, "haven't you known me long enough to realize that my tongue, of all things, rarely does what it is expected to do?"

Blushweaver smiled as the fireworks went off again. Within the auras of *two* gods, the sparks' colors grew quite powerful indeed. On the far side, some sparks fell to the ground too far from the Breath auras, and these

looked dull and weak in comparison—as if their fire were so cool and insignificant that they could be picked up and tucked away.

Blushweaver turned from the display. "So you *do* find me beautiful?"

"Of course. Why, my dear, you're positively *rank* with beauty. You're literally part of the definition of the word—it's in your title somewhere, if I'm not mistaken."

"My dear Lightsong, *I* do believe that you're making sport of me."

"I never make fun of ladies, Blushweaver," Lightsong said, picking up his drink again. "Mocking a woman is like drinking too much wine. It may be fun for a short time, but the hangover is hell."

Blushweaver paused. "But we don't get hangovers, for we cannot get drunk."

"We can't?" Lightsong asked. "Then why the blazes am I drinking all of this wine?"

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. "Sometimes, Lightsong," she finally said, "I'm not certain when you are being silly and when you're being serious."

"Well, I can help you with that one easily enough," he said. "If you *ever* conclude that I'm being serious, then you can be sure that you've been working too hard on the problem."

"I see," she said, twisting on her couch so that she was facedown. She leaned on her elbows with breasts pushed up between them, fireworks playing off her exposed back and throwing colorful shadows between her arched shoulder blades. "So, then. You admit that I'm stunning and beautiful. Would you then care to retire from the festivities this evening? Find . . . other entertainments?"

Lightsong hesitated. Being unable to bear children didn't stop the gods from seeking intimacy, particularly with other Returned. In fact, from what Lightsong could guess, the impossibility of offspring only increased the laxness of the court in these matters. Many a god took mortal lovers—Blushweaver was known to have a few of her own among her priests. Dalliances with mortals were never seen as infidelity among the gods.

Blushweaver lounged on her couch, supple, inviting. Lightsong opened his mouth, but in his mind, he saw . . . her. The woman of his vision, the one from his dreams, the face he'd mentioned to Llarimar. Who was she?

Probably nothing. A flash from his former life, or perhaps simply an image crafted by his subconscious. Maybe even, as the priests claimed, some

kind of prophetic symbol. That face shouldn't give him pause. Not when confronted with perfection.

"I . . . must decline," he found himself saying. "I need to watch the fireworks."

"Are they that much more fascinating than I?"

"Not at all. They simply seem far less likely to burn me."

She laughed at that. "Well, why don't we wait until they are through, then retire?"

"Alas," Lightsong said. "I still must decline. I am far too lazy."

"Too lazy for sex?" Blushweaver asked, rolling back onto her side and regarding him.

"I'm really quite indolent. A poor example of a god, as I keep telling my high priest. Nobody seems to listen to me, so I fear that I must continue to be diligent in proving my point. Dallying with you would, unfortunately, undermine the entire basis of my argument."

Blushweaver shook her head. "You confuse me sometimes, Lightsong. If it weren't for your reputation, I'd simply presume you to be shy. How could you have slept with Calmseer, but consistently ignore me?"

Calmseer was the last honorable Returned this city has known, Lightsong thought, sipping his drink. *Nobody left has a shred of her decency. Myself included.*

Blushweaver fell silent, watching the latest display from the firemasters. The show had grown progressively more ornate, and Lightsong was considering calling halt, lest they use up all of their fireworks on him and not have any left should another god call upon them.

Blushweaver didn't make any move to return to her own palace grounds, and Lightsong said nothing further. He suspected that she hadn't come simply for verbal sparring, or even to try and bed him. Blushweaver always had her plans. In Lightsong's experience, there was more depth to the woman than her gaudy surface suggested.

Eventually, his hunch paid off. She turned from the fireworks, eyeing the dark palace of the God King. "We have a new queen."

"I noticed," Lightsong said. "Though, admittedly, only because I was reminded several times."

They fell silent.

"Have you no thoughts on the matter?" Blushweaver finally asked.

"I try to avoid having thoughts. They lead to other thoughts, and—if you're not careful—those lead to actions. Actions make you tired. I have this on rather good authority from someone who once read it in a book."

Blushweaver sighed. "You avoid thinking, you avoid me, you avoid effort . . . is there anything you *don't* avoid?"

"Breakfast."

Blushweaver didn't react to this, which Lightsong found disappointing. She was too focused on the king's palace. Lightsong usually tried to ignore the large black building; he didn't like how it seemed to loom over him.

"Perhaps you should make an exception," Blushweaver said, "and give some thought to *this* particular situation. This queen means something."

Lightsong turned his cup around in his fingers. He knew that Blushweaver's priests were among those who called most strongly for war in the Court Assembly. He hadn't forgotten his phantom nightmare from earlier, the vision of T'Telir on fire. That image refused to fade from his mind. He never said anything for or against the idea of war. He just didn't want to be involved.

"We've had queens before," he finally said.

"Never one of the royal line," Blushweaver replied. "At least, there hasn't been one since the days of Kalad the Usurper."

Kalad. The man who had started the Manywar, the one who had used his knowledge of BioChromatic Breath to create a vast army of Lifeless and seize power in Hallandren. He had protected the kingdom with his armies, yet had shattered the kingdom as well by driving the royals into the highlands.

Now they were back. Or, at least, one of them was.

"This is a dangerous day, Lightsong," Blushweaver said quietly. "What happens if that woman bears a child who isn't Returned?"

"Impossible," Lightsong said.

"Oh? You are that confident?"

Lightsong nodded. "Of the Returned, only the God King can engender children, and they're always stillborn."

Blushweaver shook her head. "The only word we have for that is from the palace priests themselves. Yet I've heard of . . . discrepancies in the records. Even if we don't worry about those, there are plenty of other considerations. Why do we need a royal to 'legitimize' our throne? Isn't three

hundred years of rule by the Court of Gods sufficient to make the kingdom legitimate?"

Lightsong didn't respond.

"This marriage implies that we still accept royal authority," Blushweaver said. "What happens if that king up in the highlands decides to take his lands back? What happens if that queen of ours in there has a child by another man? Who is the heir? Who rules?"

"The God King rules. Everyone knows that."

"He didn't rule three hundred years ago," Blushweaver said. "The royals did. Then, after them, Kalad did—and after him, Peacegiver. Change can happen quickly. By inviting that woman into our city, we may have initiated the end of Returned rule in Hallandren."

She fell silent, pensive. Lightsong studied the beautiful goddess. It had been fifteen years since her Return—which made her old, for a Returned. Old, wise, and incredibly crafty.

Blushweaver glanced at him. "I don't intend to find myself caught, surprised, like the royals were when Kalad seized their throne. Some of us are planning, Lightsong. You can join us, if you wish."

"Politics, my dear," he said with a sigh. "You know how I loathe it."

"You're the god of bravery. We could use your confidence."

"At this point, I'm only confident that I'll be of no use to you."

Her face stiffened as she tried not to show her frustration. Eventually, she sighed and stood, stretching, showing off her perfect figure once more. "You'll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong," she said. "You're a god to these people."

"Not by choice, my dear."

She smiled, then bent down and kissed him softly. "Just consider what I said. You're a better man than you give yourself credit for being. You think I'd offer myself to just anyone?"

He hesitated, then frowned. "Actually . . . yes. I do."

She laughed, turning as her servants picked up her couch. "Oh, come now! There must be at least *three* of the other gods I wouldn't *think* of letting touch me. Enjoy the party, and do try to imagine what our king is doing to our legacy up there in his chambers right now." She glanced back at him. "Particularly if that imagining reminds you of what you just missed out on." She winked, then glided away.

Lightsong sat back on his couch, then dismissed the firemasters with words of praise. As the minstrels began to play, he tried to empty his mind of both Blushweaver's ominous words and the visions of war that had plagued his dreams.

He failed on both counts.

8

Siri groaned, rolling over. Her back hurt, her arms hurt, and her head hurt. In fact, she was so uncomfortable that she couldn't stay asleep, despite her fatigue. She sat up, holding her head.

She'd spent the night on the floor of the God King's bedchamber—sleeping, kind of. Sunlight poured into the room, reflecting off of the marble where the floor wasn't covered with rugs.

Black rugs, she thought, sitting in the middle of the rumpled blue dress, which she'd used as both blanket and pillow. *Black rugs on a black floor with black furniture. These Hallandren certainly know how to run with a motif.*

The God King wasn't in the room. Siri glanced toward the oversized black leather chair where he'd spent much of the night. She hadn't noticed him leave.

She yawned, then rose, pulling her shift out of the wadded mound of dress and putting it on over her head. She pulled her hair out, flipping it behind her. Keeping it so long was going to take some getting used to. It fell down against her back, a contented blond in color.

She'd somehow survived the night untouched.

She walked on bare feet over to the leather chair, running her fingers along its smooth surface. She'd been less than respectful. She'd dozed off. She'd curled up and pulled her dress close. She'd even glanced over at the chair a few times. Not because of defiance or a disobedient heart; she'd simply been too drowsy to remember that she wasn't supposed to look at the

God King. And he hadn't ordered her executed. Bluefingers had made her worry that the God King was volatile and quick to anger, yet if that was the case, then he had held his temper with her. What else was he going to do? The Hallandren had waited for decades to get a royal princess to marry into their line of God Kings. She smiled. *I do have some power.* He couldn't kill her—not until he had what he wanted.

It wasn't much, but it did give her a bit more confidence. She walked around the chair, noting its size. Everything in the room was built to be just a little too large, skewing her perspective, making her feel shorter than she was. She rested her hand on the arm of the chair, and found herself wondering why he hadn't decided to take her. What was wrong with her? Wasn't she desirable?

Foolish girl, she told herself, shaking her head and walking over to the still-undisturbed bed. *You spent most of the trip here worrying about what would happen on your wedding night, and then when nothing happens, you complain about that too?*

She knew she wasn't free. He would take her eventually—that was the point of the entire arrangement. But it hadn't happened last night. She smiled, yawning, then she climbed up into the bed and curled up under the covers, drifting off.

The next time she woke was a great deal more pleasant than the previous one had been. Siri stretched, and then noticed something.

Her dress, which she'd left sitting in a heap on the floor, was gone. Also, the fire in the hearth had been rebuilt—though why that was necessary was beyond her. The day was warm, and she'd kicked off the covers as she'd slept.

I'm supposed to burn the sheets, she remembered. *That's the reason they stoked the fire.*

She sat up in her shift, alone in the black room. The servants and priests wouldn't know that she'd spent the entire night on the floor unless the God King had told someone. How likely would it be for a man of his power to speak with his priests about intimate details?

Slowly, Siri climbed out of bed and pulled the sheets free. She wadded

them up, walked over, and threw them into the large hearth. Then she watched the flames. She still didn't know why the God King had left her alone. Until she knew, it was surely better to just let everyone assume that the marriage had been consummated.

After the sheets were done burning, Siri scanned the room, looking for something to wear. She found nothing. Sighing, she walked to the door, clothed only in her shift. She pulled it open, and jumped slightly. Two dozen serving women of varying ages knelt outside.

God of Colors! Siri thought. *How long have they been kneeling out here?* Suddenly, she didn't feel quite so indignant at being forced to wait upon the God King's whims.

The women stood up, heads bowed, and walked into the room. Siri backed up, cocking her head she noticed that several of the women carried in large chests. *They're dressed in different colors from yesterday,* Siri thought. The cut was the same—divided skirts, like flowing trousers, topped with sleeveless blouses and small caps, their hair coming out the back. Instead of the blue and silver, the outfits were now yellow and copper.

The women opened the trunks, removing various layers of clothing. All were of bright colors, and each was of a different cut. The women spread them out on the floor before Siri, then settled back on their knees, waiting.

Siri hesitated. She'd grown up the daughter of a king, so she'd never lacked. Yet, life in Idris was austere. She'd owned five dresses, which had nearly been an extravagant number. One had been white, and the other four had been the same wan blue.

Being confronted by so many colors and options felt overwhelming. She tried to imagine how each would look on her. Many of them were dangerously low-cut, even more so than the shirts the serving women wore—and those were already scandalous by Idris standards.

Finally, hesitantly, Siri pointed at one outfit. It was a dress in two pieces, red skirt and matching blouse. As Siri pointed, the serving women stood, some putting away the unchosen outfits, others walking over to carefully remove Siri's shift.

In a few minutes, Siri was dressed. She was embarrassed to find that—while the clothing fit her perfectly—the blouse was designed to reveal her midriff. Still, it wasn't as low-cut as the others, and the skirt went all the way down to her calves. The silky red material was far lighter than the thick

wools and linen she was accustomed to wearing. The skirt flared and ruffled when she turned, and Siri couldn't be completely certain it wasn't sheer. Standing in it, she almost felt as naked as she'd been during the night.

That appears to be a recurring theme for me here, she thought wryly as the serving women backed away. Others approached with a stool, and she sat, waiting as the women cleaned her face and arms with a pleasantly warm cloth. When that was done, they reapplied her makeup, did her hair, then sprayed her with a few puffs of perfume.

When she opened her eyes—perfume misting down around her—Bluefingers was standing in the room. "Ah, excellent," he said, servant boy standing obediently behind with ink, quill, and paper. "You're up already."

Already? Siri thought. *It has to be well past noon!*

Bluefingers looked her over, nodded to himself, then glanced at the bed, obviously checking to see that the linens had been destroyed. "Well," he said. "I trust that your servants will see to your needs, Vessel." With that, he began to walk away with the anxious tread of a man who felt he had far too much to do.

"Wait!" Siri said, standing, jostling several of her serving women.

Bluefingers hesitated. "Vessel?"

Siri floundered, uncertain how to express what she was feeling. "Do you know . . . what I'm supposed to do?"

"Do, Vessel?" the scribe asked. "You mean, in regards to . . ." He glanced at the bed.

Siri flushed. "No, not that. I mean with my time. What are my duties? What is expected of me?"

"To provide an heir."

"Beyond that."

Bluefingers frowned. "I . . . well, to be honest, Vessel, I really don't know. I must say, your arrival has certainly caused a level of disruption in the Court of Gods."

In my life, too, she thought, flushing slightly, hair turning red.

"Not that you're to blame, of course," Bluefingers said quickly. "But then . . . well, I certainly wish I'd had more forewarning."

"More forewarning?" Siri asked. "This marriage was arranged by treaty over twenty years ago!"

"Yes, well, but nobody thought . . ." He trailed off. "Ahem. Well, either way, we shall do our best to accommodate you here in the king's palace."

What was that? Siri thought. *Nobody thought . . . that the marriage would really happen? Why not? Did they assume that Idris wouldn't keep its part of the bargain?*

Regardless, he still hadn't answered her question. "Yes, but what am I supposed to *do,*" she said, sitting down on the stool again. "Am I to sit here in the palace and stare at the fire all day?"

Bluefingers chuckled. "Oh, Colors no! My lady, this is the Court of Gods! You'll find plenty to occupy you. Each day, performers are allowed to enter the court and display their talents for their deities. You may have any of these brought to you for a private performance."

"Ah," Siri said. "Can I, maybe, go horseback riding?"

Bluefingers rubbed his chin. "I suppose we could bring some horses into the court for you. Of course, we'd have to wait until the Wedding Jubilation is over."

"Wedding Jubilation?" she asked.

"You . . . don't know, then? Were you not prepared for any of this?"

Siri flushed.

"No offense intended, Vessel," Bluefingers said. "The Wedding Jubilation is a weeklong period in which we celebrate the God King's marriage. During that time, you are not to leave this palace. At the end of it, you will officially be presented to the Court of Gods."

"Oh," she said. "And after that, I can go out of the city?"

"Out of the city!" Bluefingers said. "Vessel, you can't leave the Court of Gods!"

"What?"

"You may not be a god yourself," Bluefingers continued. "But you're the wife of the God King. It would be far too dangerous to let you out. But do not fret—anything and everything you might request can be provided for you."

Except freedom, she thought, feeling a bit sick.

"I assure you, once the Wedding Jubilation is over, you will find little to complain about. Everything you could want is here: every type of indulgence, every luxury, every diversion."

Siri nodded numbly, still feeling trapped.

"Also," Bluefingers said, holding up an ink-stained finger. "If you wish, the Court Assembly meets to provide decisions to the people. Full assembly

meets once a week, though daily there are smaller judgments to be made. You aren't to sit on the assembly itself, of course, but you will certainly be allowed to attend, once the Jubilation is over. If none of this suits you, you may request an artist of the God King's priesthood to attend you. His priests include devout and accomplished artists from all genres: music, painting, dance, poetry, sculpture, puppetry, play performance, sandpainting, or any of the lesser genres."

Siri blinked. *God of Colors!* she thought. *Even being idle is daunting here.* "But there isn't any of this that I'm *required* to attend?"

"No, I shouldn't think so," Bluefingers said. "Vessel, you look displeased."

"I . . ." How could she explain? Her entire life, she'd been expected to be something—and for most of her life she'd intentionally avoided being it. Now that was gone from her. She couldn't disobey lest she get herself killed and get Idris into a war. For once, she was willing to serve, to try and be obedient. But, ironically, there didn't seem to be anything for her to do. Except, of course, bear a child.

"Very well," she said with a sigh. "Where are my rooms? I'll go there and situate myself."

"Your rooms, Vessel?"

"Yes. I assume I'm not to reside in this chamber itself."

"No," Bluefingers said, chuckling. "The conception room? Of course not."

"Then where?" Siri asked.

"Vessel," Bluefingers said. "In a way, this entire palace is yours. I don't see why you'd need specific rooms. Ask to eat, and your servants will set up a table. If you wish to rest, they will bring you a couch or a chair. Seek entertainment, and they will fetch performers for you."

Suddenly, the strange actions of her servants—simply bringing her an array of colors to choose from, then doing her makeup and hair right there—made more sense. "I see," she said, almost to herself. "And the soldiers I brought with me? Did they do as I commanded?"

"Yes, Vessel," Bluefingers said. "They left this morning. It was a wise decision; they are not dedicated servants of the Tones, and would not have been allowed to remain here in the court. They could do you no further service."

Siri nodded.

"Vessel, if I might be excused . . . ?" Bluefingers asked.

Siri nodded distractedly, and Bluefingers bustled away, leaving her to think about how terribly alone she was. *Can't focus on that,* she thought. Instead, she turned to one of her serving women—a younger one, about Siri's own age. "Well, that really doesn't tell me what to spend my time on, does it?"

The servant blushed quietly, bowing her head.

"I mean, there seems to be a lot to do, if I want," Siri said. "Maybe too much."

The girl bowed again.

That's going to get very annoying very quickly, Siri thought, gritting her teeth. Part of her wanted to do something shocking to get a reaction out of the servant, but she knew she was just being foolish. In fact, it seemed that many of her natural impulses and reactions wouldn't work here in Hallandren. So, to keep herself from doing something silly, Siri stood up, determined to examine her new home. She left the overly black room, poking her head out into the hallway. She turned back to her servants, who stood obediently in a line behind her.

"Is there any place I'm forbidden to go?" she asked.

The one she was addressing shook her head.

Fine, then, she thought. *I'd better not end up stumbling upon the God King in the bath.* She crossed the hallway, opened the door, then stepped into the yellow room she'd been in the day before. The chair and bench she'd used had been removed, replaced by a group of yellow couches. Siri raised an eyebrow, then walked through into the tub room beyond.

The tub was gone. She started. The room was the one she remembered, with same red colorings. Yet, the sloped tile platforms with their inset tubs were gone. The entire contraption must have been portable, brought in for her bath, then removed.

They really can *transform any room,* she thought with amazement. *They must have chambers full of furniture, tubs, and drapings, each of a different color, waiting upon the whims of their god.*

Curious, she left the tubless room and moved in a random direction. Each room appeared to have four doors, one on each wall. Some rooms were larger than others. Some had windows to the outside, while others were in the middle of the palace. Each was a different color, yet it was still difficult to tell the difference between them. Endless rooms, pristine with their dec-

orations following a single color's theme. Soon, she was hopelessly lost—but it didn't seem to matter. Every room was, in a way, the same as any other.

She turned to her servants. "I would like breakfast."

It happened far faster than Siri would have thought possible. Several of the women ducked out and returned with a stuffed green chair to match her current room. Siri sat down, waiting as a table, chairs, and finally food were produced as if out of nowhere. In less than fifteen minutes, she had a hot meal waiting for her.

Hesitantly, she picked up a fork and tried a bite. It wasn't until that moment that she realized how hungry she was. The meal was composed primarily of a group of sausages mixed with vegetables. The flavors were far stronger than she was accustomed to. However, the more she ate the spicy Hallandren food, the more she found herself liking it.

Hungry or not, it was strange to eat in silence. Siri was accustomed to either eating in the kitchens with the servants or at the table with her father, his generals, and whatever local people or monks he had invited to his home that evening. It was never a silent affair, yet here in Hallandren—land of colors, sounds, and ostentation—she found herself eating alone, quietly, in a room that felt dull despite its bright decorations.

Her servants watched. None of them spoke to her. Their silence was supposed to be respectful, she knew, but Siri just found it intimidating. She tried several times to draw them into conversation, but she managed to get only terse replies.

She chewed on a spiced caper. *Is this what my life is to be from now on?* she thought. *A night spent feeling half-used, half-ignored by my husband, then days spent surrounded by people, yet somehow still alone?*

She shivered, her appetite waning. She set down the fork, and her food slowly grew cold on the table before her. She stared at it, a part of her wishing she'd simply remained in the comfortable, oversized black bed.

9

Vivenna—firstborn child of Dedelin, king of Idris—gazed upon the grand city of T'Telir. It was the ugliest place she had ever seen.

People jostled their way through the streets, draped flagrantly in colors, yelling, and talking, and moving, and stinking, and coughing, and bumping. Her hair lightened to grey, she pulled her shawl close as she maintained her imitation—such that it was—of an elderly woman. She had feared that she might stand out. She needn't have worried. Who could ever stand out in this confusion?

Nevertheless, it was best to be safe. She had come—arriving in T'Telir just hours ago—to rescue her sister, not to get herself kidnapped.

It was a bold plan. Vivenna could hardly believe that she'd come up with it. Still, of the many things her tutors had taught her, one was foremost in her mind: A leader was someone who acted. Nobody else was going to help Siri, and so it was up to Vivenna.

She knew that she was inexperienced. She hoped that her awareness of that would keep her from being *too* foolhardy, but she had the best education and political tutelage her kingdom could provide, and much of her training had focused on life in Hallandren. As a devout daughter of Austre, she'd practiced all of her life to avoid standing out. She could hide in a vast, disorganized city like T'Telir.

And vast it was. She'd memorized maps, but they hadn't prepared her for the sight, sound, scent, and *colors* of the city on market day. Even the

livestock wore bright ribbons. Vivenna stood at the side of the road, stooped beside a building draped in flapping streamers. In front of her, a herdsman drove a small flock of sheep toward the market square. They had each been dyed a different color. *Won't that ruin the wool?* Vivenna thought sourly. The different colors on the animals clashed so terribly that she had to look away.

Poor Siri, she thought. *Caught up in all of this, locked in the Court of Gods, probably so overwhelmed that she can barely think.* Vivenna had been trained to deal with the terrors of Hallandren. Though the colors sickened her, she had the fortitude to withstand them. How would little Siri manage?

Vivenna tapped her foot as she stood beside the building in the shadow of a large stone statue. *Where is that man?* she thought. Parlin had yet to return from his scouting.

There was nothing to do but wait. She glanced up at the statue beside her; it was one of the famous D'Denir Celabrin. Most of the statues depicted warriors. They stood in every imaginable pose all across the entire city, armed with weapons and often dressed in colorful clothing. According to her lessons, the people of T'Telir found dressing the statues to be an amusing pastime. Lore had it that the first ones had been commissioned by Peacegiver the Blessed, the Returned who had taken command of Hallandren at the end of the Manywar. The number of statues had increased each year as new ones were paid for by the Returned—whose money, of course, came from the people themselves.

Excess and waste, Vivenna thought, shaking her head.

Finally, she noticed Parlin coming back down the street. She frowned as she saw that he was wearing some ridiculous frippery on his head—it looked a little like a sock, though much larger. The bright green hat flopped down one side of his square face, and looked very out of place against his dull brown Idris travel clothing. Tall but not lanky, Parlin was only a few years Vivenna's senior. She'd known him for most of her life; General Yarda's son had practically grown up in the palace. More recently, he'd been out in the forests, watching the Hallandren border or guarding one of the northern passes.

"Parlin?" she said as he approached, carefully keeping the annoyance out of her voice and her hair. "What is that on your head?"

"A hat," he said, characteristically terse. It wasn't that Parlin was rude; it just seemed he rarely felt he had much to say.

"I can see that it's a hat, Parlin. Where did you get it?"

"The man in the market said they're very popular."

Vivenna sighed. She'd hesitated to bring Parlin into the city. He was a good man—as solid and reliable as she'd ever known—but the life he knew was one of living in the wilderness and guarding isolated outposts. The city was probably overwhelming to him.

"The hat is ridiculous, Parlin," Vivenna said, hair controlled to keep the red out of it. "And makes you stand out."

Parlin removed the hat, tucking it in his pocket. He said nothing further, but did turn, watching the crowds of people pass. They seemed to make him as nervous as they did Vivenna. Perhaps more so. However, she was glad to have him. He was one of the few people she trusted not to go to her father; she knew that Parlin fancied her. During their youth, he'd often brought her gifts from the forest. Usually, those had taken the form of some animal he'd killed.

To Parlin's mind, nothing showed affection like a hunk of something dead and bleeding on the table.

"This place is strange," Parlin said. "People here move like herds." His eyes followed a pretty Hallandren girl as she walked by. The hussy was—like most of the women in T'Telir—wearing practically nothing. Blouses that were open well below the neck, skirts well above the knees—some women even wore trousers, just like men.

"What did you discover in the market?" she asked, drawing his attention back.

"There are a lot of Idrians here," he said.

"*What?*" Vivenna said, forgetting herself and showing her shock.

"Idrians," Parlin said. "In the market. Some were trading goods; many looked like common laborers. I watched them."

Vivenna frowned, folding her arms. "And the restaurant?" Vivenna asked. "Did you scout it as I asked?"

He nodded. "Looks clean. Feels strange to me that people eat food made by strangers."

"Did you see anyone suspicious there?"

"What would be 'suspicious' in this city?"

"I don't know. You're the one who insisted on scouting ahead."

"It's always a good idea when hunting. Less likely to scare away the animals."

"Unfortunately, Parlin," Vivenna said, "people aren't like animals."

"I am aware of that," Parlin said. "Animals make sense."

Vivenna sighed. However, she did notice just then that Parlin had been right on at least one count. She caught sight of a group of Idrians walking along the street nearby, one pulling a cart that had probably once held produce. They were easy to distinguish by their muted dress and the slight accent to their voices. It surprised her that they would come so far to trade. But, admittedly, commerce hadn't been particularly robust in Idris lately.

Reluctantly, she closed her eyes and—using the shawl to hide the transformation—changed her hair from gray to brown. If there were other Idrians in town, it was unlikely that she would stand out. Trying to act like an old woman would be more suspicious.

It still felt wrong to be exposed. In Bevalis, she'd have been recognized instantly. Of course, Bevalis had only a few thousand people in it. The vastly greater scale of T'Telir would require a conscious adjustment.

She gestured to Parlin and—gritting her teeth—joined the crowd and began making her way toward the marketplace.

The inland sea made all the difference. T'Telir was a prime port, and the dyes it sold—made from the Tears of Edgli, a local flower—made it a center of trade. She could see the evidence all around her. Exotic silks and clothing. Brown-skinned traders from Tedradel with their long black beards bound with tight leather cords into cylindrical shapes. Fresh foodstuffs from cities along the coast. In Idris, the population was spread out thinly across the farms and rangelands. In Hallandren—a country that controlled a good third of the inland sea's coast—things were different. They could burgeon. Grow.

Get flamboyant.

In the distance, she could see the plateau that held the Court of Gods, the most profane place beneath Austre's colorful eyes. Inside its walls, within the God King's terrible palace, Siri was being held captive, prisoner of Susebron himself. Logically, Vivenna understood her father's decision. In raw political terms, Vivenna was more valuable to Idris. If war was certain, it made sense to send the less useful daughter as a stalling tactic.

But it was hard for Vivenna to think of Siri as "less useful." She was

gregarious, but she'd also been the one who smiled when others were down. She was the one who brought gifts when nobody was expecting them. She was infuriating, but also innocent. She was Vivenna's baby sister, and someone had to look out for her.

The God King would demand an heir. That was to have been Vivenna's duty—her sacrifice for her people. She had been prepared and willing. It felt *wrong* for Siri to have to do something so terrible.

Her father had made his decision; the best one for Idris. Vivenna had made her own. If there was going to be war, then Vivenna wanted to be ready to get her sister out of the city the moment it got dangerous. In fact, Vivenna felt there *had* to be a way to rescue Siri before the war came—a way of fooling the Hallandrens, making them think that Siri had died. Something that would save Vivenna's sister, yet not further provoke hostilities.

This wasn't something her father could condone. So she hadn't told him. Better for him to be able to deny involvement if things went wrong.

Vivenna moved down the street, eyes downcast, careful to not draw attention to herself. Getting away from Idris had been surprisingly easy. Who would suspect such a brash move from Vivenna—she who had always been perfect? Nobody wondered when she'd asked for food and supplies, explaining that she wanted to make emergency kits. Nobody questioned when she'd proposed an expedition to the higher reaches to gather important roots, an excuse to disguise the first few weeks of her disappearance.

Parlin had been easy enough to persuade. He trusted her, perhaps too much, and he had intimate knowledge of the paths and trails leading down to Hallandren. He'd been as far as the city walls on one scouting trip a year back. With his help, she'd been able to recruit a few of his friends—also woodsmen—to protect her and be part of her "expedition." She'd sent the rest of them back earlier that morning. They would be of little use in the city, where she had already arranged for other allies to be her protection. Parlin's friends would carry word to her father, who would already have heard of what she'd done. Before leaving, she'd arranged for her maid to deliver a letter to him. Counting off the days, she realized that her letter would be delivered that very evening.

She didn't know what her father's reaction would be. Perhaps he would covertly send soldiers to retrieve her. Perhaps he'd leave her be. She'd warned him that if she saw Idris soldiers searching for her, she would simply

go to the Court of Gods, explain that there had been a mistake, and trade herself for her sister.

She sincerely hoped she wouldn't have to do that. The God King was not to be trusted; he might take Vivenna captive and keep Siri, thereby gaining two princesses to provide pleasure instead of one.

Don't think about that, Vivenna told herself, pulling her shawl closer despite the heat.

Better to find another way. The first step was to find Lemex, her father's chief spy in Hallandren. Vivenna had corresponded with him on several occasions. Her father had wanted her to be familiar with his best intelligence agent in T'Telir, and his foresight would work against him. Lemex knew Vivenna, and had been told to take orders from her. She'd sent the spy a letter—delivered via a messenger with multiple mounts to allow quick delivery—the day she'd left Idris. Assuming the message had arrived safely, the spy would meet her in the appointed restaurant.

Her plan seemed good. She was prepared. Why, then, did she feel so utterly daunted when she entered the market?

She stood quietly, a rock in the stream of human traffic flooding down the street. It was such an enormous expanse, covered in tents, pens, buildings, and people. There were no cobblestones here, only sand and dirt with the occasional patch of grass, and there didn't appear to be much reason or direction to the arrangement of buildings. The arbitrary streets had simply been made where people felt like going. Merchants yelled out what they sold, banners waved in the wind, and entertainers vied for attention. It was an orgy of color and motion.

"Wow," Parlin said quietly.

Vivenna turned, shaking off her stupor. "Weren't you just here?"

"Yeah," Parlin said, eyes a little glazed over. "Wow again."

Vivenna shook her head. "Let's go to the restaurant."

Parlin nodded. "This way."

Vivenna followed him, annoyed. This was Hallandren—she shouldn't be awed by it. She should be disgusted. Yet she was so overwhelmed that it was hard to feel anything beyond a slight sense of sickness. She'd never realized how much she took Idris's beautiful simplicity for granted.

Parlin's familiar presence was welcome as the powerful wave of scents, sounds, and sights tried to drown her. In some places the crowds grew so

thick that they had to shove their way through. On occasion, Vivenna found herself on the edge of panic, pressed in by dirty, repulsively colored bodies. Blessedly, the restaurant wasn't too far in, and they arrived just when she thought the sheer excess of the place would make her scream. On its signboard out front, the restaurant had a picture of a boat sailing merrily. If the scents coming from inside were any indication, then the ship represented the restaurant's cuisine: fish. Vivenna barely kept herself from gagging. She'd eaten fish several times in preparation for her life in Hallandren. She'd never grown to like it.

Parlin walked in, immediately stepping to the side and crouching, almost like a wolf, as he let his eyes adjust to the dimness. Vivenna gave the restaurant keeper the fake name Lemex knew to call her by. The restaurant keeper eyed Parlin, then shrugged and led the two of them to one of the tables on the far side of the room. Vivenna sat down; despite her training, she was a little uncertain what one did at a restaurant. It seemed significant to her that places like restaurants could exist in Hallandren—places meant to feed not travelers, but the locals who couldn't be bothered to prepare their own food and dine at their own homes.

Parlin didn't sit, but remained standing beside her chair, watching the room. He looked as tense as she felt. "Vivenna," he said softly, leaning down. "Your hair."

She started, realizing that her hair had lightened from the trauma of pushing her way through the crowd. It hadn't bleached completely white—she was far too well trained for that—but it had grown whiter, as if it had been powdered.

Feeling a jolt of paranoia, Vivenna replaced the shawl on her head, looking away as the restaurant owner approached to take their order. A short list of meals was scratched into the table, and Parlin finally sat down, drawing the restaurant owner's attention away from Vivenna.

You're better than this, she told herself sternly. *You've studied Hallandren for most of your life.* Her hair darkened, returning to its brown. The change was subtle enough that if someone had been watching, they would have probably thought it to be a trick of the light. She kept the shawl up, feeling ashamed. One walk through the market, and she lost control?

Think of Siri, she told herself. That gave her strength. Her mission was impromptu, even reckless, but it was important. Calm once again, she put

the shawl back down and waited while Parlin chose a dish—a seafood stew—and the innkeeper walked away.

"Now what?" Parlin asked.

"We wait," Vivenna said. "In my letter, I told Lemex to check the restaurant each day at noon. We will sit here until he arrives."

Parlin nodded, fidgeting.

"What is it?" Vivenna asked calmly.

He glanced toward the door. "I don't trust this place, Vivenna. I can't smell anything but bodies and spices, can't hear anything but the chatter of people. There's no wind, no trees, no rivers, just . . . *people.*"

"I know."

"I want to go back outside," he said.

"What?" she said. "Why?"

"If you aren't familiar with a place," he said awkwardly, "you need to become familiar with it." He gave no other explanation.

Vivenna felt a stab of fear at the thought of being left alone. However, it wasn't proper to demand Parlin stay and attend her. "Do you promise to stay close?"

He nodded.

"Then go."

He did, walking from the room. He didn't move like one of the Hallandren—his motions were too fluid, too much like a prowling beast. *Perhaps I should have sent him back with the others.* But the thought of being completely alone had been too much. She needed *someone* to help her find Lemex. As it was, she felt that she was probably taking too great a risk at entering the city with only one guard, even one as skilled as Parlin.

But it was done. No use worrying now. She sat, arms folded on the table, thinking. Back in Idris, her plan to save Siri had seemed simpler. Now the true nature of it lay before her. Somehow, she had to get into the Court of Gods and sneak her sister out. How would one accomplish something so audacious? Surely the Court of Gods would be well guarded.

Lemex will have ideas, she told herself. *We don't have to do anything yet. I'm—*

A man sat down at her table. Less colorfully dressed than most Hallandren, he wore an outfit made mostly of brown leather, though he did have a token red cloth vest thrown over the top. This was not Lemex. The spy was

an older man in his fifties. This stranger had a long face and styled hair, and couldn't have been older than thirty-five.

"I hate being a mercenary," the man said. "You know why?"

Shocked, Vivenna sat frozen, mouth opened slightly.

"The prejudice," the man said. "Everyone else, they work, they ask for recompense, and they are respected for it. Not mercenaries. We get a bad name just for doing our job. How many minstrels get spat on for accepting payment from the highest bidder? How many bakers feel guilty for selling more of pastries to one man, then selling those same pastries to the man's enemies?" He eyed her. "No. Only the mercenary. Unfair, wouldn't you say?"

"W . . . who are you?" Vivenna finally managed to ask. She jumped as another man sat down on her other side. Large of girth, this man had a cudgel strapped to his back. A colorful bird was sitting on the end of it.

"I'm Denth," the first man said, taking her hand and shaking it. "That's Tonk Fah."

"Pleased," Tonk Fah said, taking her hand once Denth was through with it.

"Unfortunately, Princess," Denth said, "we're here to kill you."

10

Vivenna's hair instantly bleached to a stark white.

Think! she told herself. *You've been trained in politics! You studied hostage negotiation. But . . . what do you do when you* are *the hostage?*

Suddenly, the two men burst out laughing. The larger man thumped the table several times with his hand, causing his bird to squawk.

"Sorry, Princess," Denth—the thinner man—said, shaking his head. "Just a bit of mercenary humor."

"We kill sometimes, but we don't murder," Tonk Fah said. "That's assassin work."

"Assassins," Denth said, holding up a finger. "Now, *they* get respect. Why do you suppose that is? They're really just mercenaries with fancier names."

Vivenna blinked, struggling to get control of her nerves. "You're not here to kill me," she said, voice stiff. "So you're just going to kidnap me?"

"Gods, no," Denth said. "Bad business, that. How do you make money at it? Every time you kidnap someone worth the ransom, you upset people a whole lot more powerful than you are."

"Don't make important people angry," Tonk Fah said, yawning. "Unless you're getting paid by people who are even *more* powerful."

Denth nodded. "And that isn't even considering the feeding and care of captives, the exchanging of ransom notes, and the arranging of drop-offs. It's a headache, I tell you. Terrible way to make money."

The table fell silent. Vivenna placed her hands flat on its top to keep

them from quivering. *They know who I am,* she thought, forcing herself to think logically. *Either they recognize me, or . . .*

"You work for Lemex," she said.

Denth smiled widely. "See, Tonk? He said she was a clever one."

"Guess that's why she's a princess and we're just mercenaries," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna frowned. *Are they mocking me or not?* "Where is Lemex? Why didn't he come himself?"

Denth smiled again, nodding toward the restaurant owner as the man brought a large pot of steaming stew to the table. It smelled of hot spices, and had what appeared to be crab claws floating in it. The owner dropped a group of wooden spoons to the table, then retreated.

Denth and Tonk Fah didn't wait for permission to eat her meal. "Your friend," Denth said, grabbing a spoon, "Lemex—our employer—isn't doing so well."

"Fevers," Tonk Fah said between slurps.

"He requested that we bring you to him," Denth said. He handed her a folded piece of paper with one hand, while cracking a claw between three fingers of the other. Vivenna cringed as he slurped the contents out.

Princess, the paper read. *Please trust these men. Denth has served me well for some measure now, and he is loyal—if any mercenary can be called loyal. He and his men have been paid, and I am confident he will stay true to us for the duration of his contract. I offer proof of authenticity by virtue of this password: bluemask.*

The writing was in Lemex's hand. More than that, he had given the proper password. Not "bluemask"—that was misdirection. The true password was using the word "measure" instead of time. She glanced at Denth, who slurped out the insides of another claw.

"Ah, now," he said, tossing aside the shell. "This is the tricky part; she has to make a decision. Are we telling her the truth, or are we fooling her? Have we fabricated that letter? Or maybe we took the old spy captive and tortured him, forcing him to write the words."

"We could bring you his fingers as proof of our good faith," Tonk Fah said. "Would that help?

Vivenna raised an eyebrow. "Mercenary humor?"

"Such that it is," Denth said with a sigh. "We're not generally a clever

lot. Otherwise, we'd probably have selected a profession without such a high mortality rate."

"Like your profession, Princess," Tonks said. "Good lifespans, usually. I've often wondered if I should apprentice myself to one."

Vivenna frowned as the two men chuckled. *Lemex wouldn't have broken under torture,* she thought. *He's too well trained. Even if he had broken, he wouldn't have included both the real password and the false one.*

"Let's go," she said, standing.

"Wait," Tonk Fah said, spoon to lips, "we're skipping the rest of our meal?"

Vivenna eyed the red-colored soup and its bobbing crustacean limbs. "Definitely."

Lemex coughed quietly. His aged face was streaked with sweat, his skin clammy and pale, and he occasionally gave a whispered mumble of delirious ramblings.

Vivenna sat on a stool beside his bed, hands in her lap. The two mercenaries waited with Parlin at the back of the room. The only other person present was a solemn nurse—the same woman who had informed Vivenna in a quiet voice that nothing more could be done.

Lemex was dying. It was unlikely that he would last the day.

This was the first Vivenna had seen Lemex's face, though she'd often corresponded with him. The face looked . . . wrong. She knew that Lemex was growing old; that made him a better spy, for few looked for spies among the elderly. Yet he wasn't supposed to be this frail stick of a person, shaking and coughing. He was supposed to be a spry, quick-tongued old gentleman. That was what she had imagined.

She felt like she was losing one of her dearest friends, though she had never really known him. With him went her refuge in Hallandren, her secret advantage. He was the one she had supposed would make this insane plan of hers work. The skilled, crafty mentor she had counted on having at her side.

He coughed again. The nurse glanced at Vivenna. "He goes in and out of lucidity, my lady. Just this morning, he spoke of you, but now he's getting worse and worse. . . ."

"Thank you," Vivenna said quietly. "You are excused."

The woman bowed and left.

Now it is time to be a princess, Vivenna thought, rising and leaning over Lemex's bed.

"Lemex," she said. "I need you to pass on your knowledge. How do I contact your spy networks? Where are the other Idris agents in the city? What are the passcodes that will get them to listen to me?"

He coughed, staring unseeingly, whispering something. She leaned closer.

". . . never say it," he said. "You can torture me all that you want. I won't give in."

Vivenna sat back. By design, the Idrian spy network in Hallandren was loosely organized. Her father knew all of their agents, but Vivenna had only ever communicated with Lemex, the leader and coordinator of the network. She gritted her teeth, leaning forward again. She felt like a grave robber as she shook Lemex's head slightly.

"Lemex, look at me. I'm not here to torture you. I'm the princess. You received a letter from me earlier. Now I've come to you."

"Can't fool me," the old man whispered. "Your torture is nothing. I won't give it up. Not to you."

Vivenna sighed, looking away.

Suddenly, Lemex shuddered, and a wave of color washed across the bed, over Vivenna, and pulsed along the floor before fading. Despite herself, Vivenna stepped back in shock.

Another pulse came. It wasn't color itself. It was a wave of *enhanced* color—a ripple that made the hues in the room stand out more as it passed. The floor, the sheets, her own dress—it all flared to vibrant vividness for a second, then faded back to the original hues.

"What in Austre's name was *that*?" Vivenna asked.

"BioChromatic Breath, Princess," Denth said as he stood, leaning against the doorframe. "Old Lemex has a lot of it. Couple hundred Breaths, I'd guess."

"That's impossible," Vivenna said. "He's Idrian. He'd never accept Breath."

Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, who was scratching his parrot's neck. The bulky soldier just shrugged.

Another wave of color came from Lemex.

"He's dying, Princess," Denth said. "His Breath is going irregular."

Vivenna glared at Denth. "He doesn't have—"

Something grabbed her arm. She jumped, looking down at Lemex, who had managed to reach up and take hold of her. He was focused on her face. "Princess Vivenna," he said, eyes showing some lucidity at least.

"Lemex," she said. "Your contacts. You have to give them to me!"

"I've done something bad, Princess."

She froze.

"Breath, Princess," he said. "I inherited it from my predecessor, and I've bought more. A lot more. . . ."

God of Colors . . . Vivenna thought with a sick feeling in her stomach.

"I know it was wrong," Lemex whispered. "But . . . I felt so powerful. I could make the very dust of the earth obey my command. It was for the good of Idris! Men with Breath are respected here in Hallandren. I could get into parties where I normally would have been excluded. I could go to the Court of Gods when I wished and hear the court assembly. The Breath extended my life, made me spry despite my age. I . . ."

He blinked, eyes unfocusing.

"Oh, Austre," he whispered. "I've damned myself. I've gained notoriety through abusing the souls of others. And now I'm dying."

"Lemex!" Vivenna said. "Don't think about that now. Names! I need names and passcodes. Don't leave me alone!"

"Damned," he whispered. "Someone take it. Please take it away from me!"

Vivenna tried to pull back, but he still held on to her arm. She shuddered, thinking about the Breath he held.

"You know, Princess," Denth said from behind. "Nobody really tells mercenaries anything. It's an unfortunate—but very realistic—drawback of our profession. Never trusted. Never looked to for advice."

She glanced back at him. He leaned against the door, Tonk Fah a short distance away. Parlin stood there as well, holding that ridiculous green hat in his fingers.

"Now, if someone *were* to ask my opinion," Denth continued, "I'd point out how much those Breaths are worth. Sell them, and you'd have enough money to buy your *own* spy network—or pretty much anything else you wanted."

Vivenna looked back at the dying man. He was mumbling to himself.

"If he dies," Denth said, "that Breath dies with him. All of it."

"A shame," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna paled. "I will not traffic in the souls of men! I don't care how much they're worth."

"Suit yourself," Denth said. "Hope nobody suffers when your mission fails, though."

Siri. . . .

"No," Vivenna said, partially to herself. "I couldn't take them." It was true. Even the thought of letting someone else's Breath mingle with her own—the idea of drawing another person's soul into her own body—made her sick.

Vivenna turned back to the dying spy. His BioChroma was burning brightly now, and his sheets practically glowed. It was better to let that Breath die with him.

Yet without Lemex, she would have no help in the city, no one to guide her and provide refuge for her. She'd barely brought along enough money to cover lodging and meals, let alone bribes or supplies. She told herself that taking the Breath would be like using goods one had found in a bandit's cavern. Did you throw it away just because it had originally been acquired through crime? Her training and lessons whispered that she needed resources badly, and that the damage had already been done. . . .

No! she thought again. *It just isn't right! I can't hold it. I couldn't.*

Of course, perhaps it would be wise to let someone *else* hold the Breaths for a time. Then she could think about what to do with them at her leisure. Maybe . . . maybe even find the people they had been taken from and give them back. She turned back, glancing at Denth and Tonk Fah.

"Don't look at me like that, Princess," Denth said, chuckling. "I see the glint in your eyes. I'm not going to keep that Breath for you. Having that much BioChroma makes a man far too important."

Tonk Fah nodded. "It'd be like hiking about the city with a bag of gold on your back."

"I like my Breath the way it is," Denth said. "I only need one, and it's functioning just fine. Keeps me alive, doesn't draw attention to me, and sits there waiting to be sold if I need it."

Vivenna glanced at Parlin. But . . . no, she couldn't force the Breath on

him. She turned back to Denth. "What kind of things does your agreement with Lemex provide for?"

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, then glanced back at her. The look in his eyes was enough. He was paid to obey. He'd take the Breath if she commanded it.

"Come here," she said, nodding to a stool beside her.

Denth approached reluctantly. "You know, Princess," he said, sitting. "If you give me that Breath, then I could just run off with it. I'd be a wealthy man. You wouldn't want to put that kind of temptation into the hands of an unscrupulous mercenary, now, would you?"

She hesitated.

If he runs off with it, then what do I lose? That would solve a lot of problems for her. "Take it," she ordered.

He shook his head. "That's not the way it works. Our friend there has to give it to me."

She looked at the old man. "I . . ." She began to command Lemex to do just that, but she had second thoughts. Austre wouldn't want her to take the Breath, no matter what the circumstances—a man who took Breath from others was worse than a slaver.

"No," she said. "No, I've changed my mind. We won't take the Breath."

At that moment, Lemex stopped his mumbling. He looked up, meeting Vivenna's eyes.

His hand was still on her arm.

"My life to yours," he said in an eerily clear voice, his grip tight on her arm as she jumped back. "*My Breath become yours!*"

A vibrant cloud of shifting, iridescent air burst from his mouth, puffing toward her. Vivenna closed her mouth, eyes wide, hair white. She ripped her arm free from Lemex's grip, even as his face grew dull, his eyes losing their luster, the colors around him fading.

The Breath shot toward her. Her closed mouth had no effect; the Breath struck, hitting her like a physical force, washing across her body. She gasped, falling to her knees, body quivering with a perverse pleasure. She could suddenly *feel* the other people in the room. She could sense them watching her. And—as if a light had been lit—everything around her became more vibrant, more real, and more alive.

She gasped, shaking in awe. She vaguely heard Parlin rushing to her side,

speaking her name. But, oddly, the only thing she could think of was the melodic quality of his voice. She could pick out each tone in every word he spoke. She knew them instinctively.

Austre, God of Colors! she thought, steadying herself with one hand against the wooden floor as the shakes subsided. *What have I done?*

11

"But surely we can bend the rules a little bit," Siri said, walking quickly beside Treledees.

Treledees eyed her. The priest—high priest of the God King—would have been tall even without the elaborate miter on his head. With it, he seemed to tower over her almost like one of the Returned.

Well, a spindly, obnoxious, disdainful Returned.

"An exception?" he asked with his leisurely Hallandren accent. "No, I do not think that will be possible, Vessel."

"I don't see why not," Siri said as a servant pulled open the door in front of them, allowing them to leave a green-colored room and pass into a blue one. Treledees respectfully let her pass through the doorway first, though she sensed that he was displeased he had to do so.

Siri ground her teeth, trying to think of another avenue of attack. *Vivenna would be calm and logical,* she thought. *She'd explain why she should be allowed to leave the palace in a way that made sense so that the priest listened to her.* Siri took a deep breath, trying to ease the red from her hair and the frustration from her attitude.

"Look. Couldn't I, maybe, go on *one* trip outside? Just into the court itself?"

"Impossible," Treledees said. "If you lack for entertainment, why not have your servants send for minstrels or jugglers? I'm sure they could keep you occupied." *And out of my hair,* his tone seemed to imply.

Couldn't he understand? It wasn't lack of something to do that frustrated her. It was that she couldn't see the sky. Couldn't run away from walls and locks and rules. Barring that, she would have settled for someone to talk to. "At least let me meet with one of the gods. I mean, really—what is accomplished by keeping me locked up like this?"

"You're not 'locked up,' Vessel," Treledees said. "You are observing a period of isolation in which you can dedicate yourself to contemplating your new place in life. It is an ancient and worthy practice, one that shows respect for the God King and his divine monarchy."

"Yes, but this is Hallandren," Siri said. "It's the land of laxness and frivolity! Surely you can see your way to making an exception."

Treledees stopped short. "We do *not* make exceptions in matters of religion, Vessel. I must assume that you are testing me in some way, for I find it hard to believe that anyone worthy of touching our God King could harbor such vulgar thoughts."

Siri cringed. *Less than a week in the city,* she thought, *and I've already started letting my tongue get me into trouble.* Siri didn't dislike people—she loved to talk to them, spend time with them, laugh with them. However, she couldn't make them do what she wanted, not in the way that a politician was supposed to be able to do. That was something she should have learned from Vivenna.

She and Treledees continued walking. Siri wore a long, flowing brown skirt that covered her feet and had a train that trailed behind her. The priest was wearing golds and maroons—colors matched by the servants. It still amazed her that everyone in the palace had so many costumes, even if they were identical save for color.

She knew that she shouldn't let herself get annoyed with the priests. They already didn't seem to like her, and getting snappish wouldn't help. It was just that the last few days had been so *dull.* Trapped in the palace, unable to leave, unable to find anyone to talk to, she felt herself nearly going mad.

But there would be no exceptions. Apparently.

"Will that be all, Vessel?" Treledees asked, pausing beside a door. It almost seemed like he found it a chore to remain civil toward her.

Siri sighed, but nodded. The priest bowed, then opened the door and quickly rushed away. Siri watched him go, tapping her foot, arms folded.

Her servants stood arrayed behind her, silent as always. She considered finding Bluefingers, but . . . no. He always had so much to do, and she felt bad distracting him.

Sighing again, she motioned for her servants to prepare the evening meal. Two fetched a chair from the side of the room. Siri sat, resting as food was gathered. The chair was plush, but it was still difficult to sit in a way that didn't aggravate one of her aches or cramps. Each of the last six nights, she had been forced to kneel, naked, until she finally grew so drowsy that she drifted off. Sleeping on the hard stone had left a dull, persistent pain in her back and neck.

Each morning, once the God King was gone, she moved to the bed. When she awoke the second time, she burned the sheets. After that, she chose her clothing. There was a new array each time, with no repeated outfits. She wasn't sure where the servants got such a steady supply of clothing in Siri's size, but it made her hesitant about choosing her daily costume. She knew that she'd likely never see any of the options again.

After dressing, she was free to do as she wished, assuming she didn't leave the palace. When night came, she was bathed, then given a choice of luxurious gowns to wear into the bedchamber. As a matter of comfort, she had started requesting more and more ornate gowns, with more fabric to use in sleeping. She often wondered what the dressmakers would think if they knew that their gowns were only worn for a few brief moments before being discarded to the floor, then eventually used as blankets.

She didn't own anything, yet could have whatever she wanted. Exotic foods, furniture, entertainers, books, art . . . she only needed ask. And yet, when she was finished, it was removed. She had everything and nothing at the same time.

She yawned. The interrupted sleep schedule left her bleary-eyed and tired. The completely empty days didn't help either. *If only there were someone to talk to.* But servants, priests, and scribes were all locked into their formal roles. That accounted for everyone she interacted with.

Well, except *him.*

Could she even call that interacting? The God King appeared to enjoy looking at her body, but he'd never given her any indication that he wanted more. He simply let her kneel, those eyes of his watching and dissecting her. That was the sum total of their marriage.

The servants finished putting out her dinner then lined up by the wall. It was getting late—almost time for her nightly bathing. *I'll have to eat quickly,* she thought, sitting at the table. *After all, I wouldn't want to be late for the evening's ogling.*

A FEW HOURS LATER, Siri stood bathed, perfumed, and dressed before the massive golden door that led into the God King's bedchamber. She breathed deeply, calming herself, anxiety bringing her hair to a pale brown. She still hadn't gotten used to this part.

It was silly. She knew what would happen. And yet, the anticipation—the fear—was still there. The God King's actions proved the power he had over her. One day he would take her, and it could come at any time. Part of her wished he'd just be done with it. The extended dread was even worse than that first single evening of terror.

She shivered. Bluefingers eyed her. Perhaps eventually he'd trust her to arrive at the bedchamber on time. Each night so far, he'd come to escort her.

At least he hasn't shown up while I'm bathing again. The warm water and pleasant scents should have made her relax—unfortunately, she tended to spend each bath worrying about either her impending visit to the God King or some male servant walking in on her.

She glanced at Bluefingers.

"A few more minutes, Vessel," he said.

How does he know? she thought. The man seemed to have a supernatural sense of time. She hadn't seen any form of timepiece in the palace—neither sundial, metered candle, nor water clock. In Hallandren, apparently, gods and queens didn't worry about such things. They had servants to remind them of appointments.

Bluefingers glanced at the door, then at her. When he saw that she was watching him, he immediately turned away. As he stood, he started shuffling his weight from foot to foot.

What does he *have to be nervous about?* she thought with annoyance, turning to stare at the door's intricate gold designs. *He's not the one who has to go through this every night.*

"Do . . . things go well with the God King, then?" Bluefingers asked suddenly.

Siri frowned.

"I can see that you're tired a lot of the time," Bluefingers said. "I . . . guess that means you are very . . . active at night."

"That's good, right? Everyone wants an heir as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course," Bluefingers said, wringing his hands. "It's just that . . ." He trailed off, then glanced at her, meeting her eyes. "You just might want to be careful, Vessel. Keep your wits about you. Try to stay alert."

Her hair bleached the rest of the way white. "You make it sound as if I'm in danger," she said softly.

"What? Danger?" Bluefingers said, glancing to the side. "Nonsense. What would you have to fear? I was simply suggesting that you remain alert, should the God King have needs you should fulfill. Ah, see, now it's time. Enjoy your evening, Vessel."

With that, he pushed open the door, placed a hand on her back, and guided her into the room. At the last moment, he moved his head up next to hers. "You should watch yourself, child," he whispered. "Not all here in the palace is as it seems."

Siri frowned, turning, but Bluefingers plastered on a false smile and pushed the door shut.

What in Austre's name was that? she thought, pausing for what was probably too long a time as she stared at the door. Finally, she sighed, turning away. The usual fire crackled in the hearth, but it was smaller than previously.

He was there. Siri didn't need to look to see him. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, she could notice that the fire's colors—blue, orange, even black—were far too true, far too *vibrant.* Her gown, a brilliant golden satin, seemed to burn with its own inner color. Anything that was white—some of the lace on her dress, for instance—bent slightly, giving off a rainbow of colors as if seen through a prism. Part of her wished for a well-lit room, where she could experience the full beauty of BioChroma.

But, of course, that was not right. The God King's Breath was a perversion. He was fed on the souls of his people, and the colors he evoked came at their expense.

Shivering, Siri undid the side of her dress then let the garment fall to pieces around her—the long sleeves slipping free, bodice falling forward, skirt and gown rustling as they dropped to the floor. She completed the ritual, sliding the straps of her shift off her shoulders, then dropping the garment to the floor beside the gown. She stepped free of both, then bowed herself down into her customary posture.

Her back complained, and she ruefully contemplated another uncomfortable night. *The least they could do,* she thought, *is make certain the fire is large enough.* At night in the large stone palace, it got chilly despite the Hallandren tropical climate. Particularly if one were naked.

Focus on Bluefingers, she thought, trying to distract herself. *What did he mean? Things are not what they seem in the palace?*

Was he referring to the God King and his ability to have her killed? She was well aware of the God King's power. How could she forget it, with him sitting not fifteen feet away, watching from the shadows? No, that wasn't it. He'd felt he'd needed to give this warning quietly, without others hearing. *Watch yourself. . . .*

It smelled of politics. She gritted her teeth. If she'd paid more attention to her tutors, might she have been able to pick out a more subtle meaning in Bluefingers's warning?

As if I needed something else to be confused about, she thought. If Bluefingers had something to tell her, why hadn't he just said it? As the minutes passed, his words turned over and over in her mind like a restless sleeper, but she was too uncomfortable and cold to come to any conclusions. That only left her feeling *more* annoyed.

Vivenna would have figured it out. Vivenna probably would have known instinctively why the God King hadn't chosen to sleep with her. She would have fixed it the first night.

But Siri was incompetent. She tried so *hard* to do as Vivenna would have—to be the best wife she could, to serve Idris. To be the woman that everyone expected her to be.

But she wasn't. She *couldn't* just keep doing this. She felt trapped in the palace. She couldn't get the priests to do more than roll their eyes at her. She couldn't even tempt the God King to bed her. On top of that, she could very well be in danger, and she couldn't even understand why or how.

In simpler terms, she was just plain frustrated.

Groaning at her aching limbs, Siri sat up in the dark room and looked at the shadowy form in the corner. "Will you please just get *on* with it?" she blurted out.

Silence.

Siri felt her hair bleach a terrible bone white as she realized what she'd just done. She stiffened, casting her eyes down, weariness fleeing in the face of sudden anxiety.

What had she been *thinking*? The God King could call servants to execute her. In fact, he didn't even need that. He could bring her own dress to life, Awakening it to strangle her. He could make the rug rise up and smother her. He could probably bring the ceiling down on her, all without moving from his chair.

Siri waited, breathing with shallow anxiety, anticipating the fury and retribution. But . . . nothing happened. Minutes passed.

Finally, Siri glanced up. The God King had moved, sitting up straighter, regarding her from his darkened chair beside the bed. She could see his eyes reflecting the firelight. She couldn't make out much of his face, but he didn't *seem* angry. He just seemed cold and distant.

She almost cast her eyes down again, but hesitated. If snapping at him wouldn't provoke a reaction, then looking at him wasn't likely to either. So she turned her chin up and met his eyes, knowing full well that she was being foolish. Vivenna would never have provoked the man. She would have remained quiet and demure, either solving the problem or—if there was no solution—kneeling every night until her patience impressed even the God King of Hallandren.

But Siri was not Vivenna. She was just going to have to accept that fact.

The God King continued to look at her, and Siri found herself blushing. She'd knelt before him naked six nights in a row, but *facing* him unclothed was more embarrassing. Still, she didn't back down. She continued to kneel, watching him, forcing herself to stay awake.

It was difficult. She was tired, and the position was actually less comfortable than bowing had been. She watched anyway, waiting, the hours passing.

Eventually—at about the same time that he left the room every night—the God King stood up. Siri stiffened, shocked alert. However, he simply walked to the door. He tapped quietly, and it opened for him, servants waiting on the other side. He stepped out and the door closed.

Siri waited tensely. No soldiers came to arrest her; no priests came to chastise her. Eventually, she just walked over to the bed and burrowed into its covers, savoring the warmth.

The God King's wrath, she thought drowsily, *is decidedly less wrathful than reported.*

With that, she fell asleep.

12

Eventually, Lightsong had to hear petitions.

It was annoying, since the Wedding Jubilation wouldn't even be over for another few days. The people, however, needed their gods. He knew he shouldn't feel annoyed. He'd gotten most of a week off for the wedding fete—copiously unattended by either the bride or groom—and that was enough. All he had to do was spend a few hours each day looking at art and listening to the woes of the people. It wasn't much. Even if it did wear away at his sanity.

He sighed, sitting back in his throne. He wore an embroidered cap on his head, matched by a loose robe of gold and red. The garment wrapped over both shoulders, twisted about his body, and was hung with golden tassels. Like all of his clothing, it was even *more* complicated to put on than it looked.

If my servants were to suddenly leave me, he thought with amusement, *I'd be totally incapable of getting dressed.*

He leaned his head on one fist, elbow on the throne's armrest. This room of his palace opened directly out onto the lawn—harsh weather was rare in Hallandren, and a cool breeze blew in off of the sea, smelling of brine. He closed his eyes, breathing in.

He'd dreamed of war again last night. Llarimar had found that particularly meaningful. Lightsong was just disturbed. Everyone said that if war did come, Hallandren would easily win. But if that were the case, then why

did he always dream of *T'Telir* burning? Not some distant Idrian city, but his own home.

It means nothing, he told himself. *Just a manifestation of my own worries.*

"Next petition, Your Grace," Llarimar whispered from his side.

Lightsong sighed, opening his eyes. Both edges of the room were lined with priests in their coifs and robes. Where had he gotten so many? Did any god need that much attention?

He could see a line of people extending outside onto the lawn. They were a sorry, forlorn lot, several coughing from some malady or another. *So many,* he thought as a woman was led into the room. He'd been seeing petitioners for over an hour already. *I guess I should have expected this. It's been almost a week.*

"Scoot," he said, turning to his priest. "Go tell those waiting people to sit down in the grass. There's no reason for them to all stand there like that. This could take some time."

Llarimar hesitated. Standing was, of course, a sign of respect. However, he nodded, waving over a lesser priest to carry the message.

Such a crowd, waiting to see me, Lightsong thought. *What will it take to convince the people that I'm useless?* What would it take to get them to stop coming to him? After five years of petitions, he honestly wasn't certain if he could take another five.

The newest petitioner approached his throne. She carried a child in her arms.

Not a child . . . Lightsong thought, cringing mentally.

"Great One," the woman said, falling to her knees on the carpet. "Lord of Bravery."

Lightsong didn't speak.

"This is my child, Halan," the woman said, holding out the baby. As it got close enough to Lightsong's aura, the blanket burst with a sharp blue color two and half steps from pure. He could easily see that the child was suffering from a terrible sickness. It had lost so much weight that its skin was shriveled. The baby's Breath was so weak that it flickered like a candle running out of wick. It would be dead before the day was out. Perhaps before the hour was out.

"The healers, they say he has deathfever," the woman said. "I know that

he's going to die." The baby made a sound—a kind of half-cough, perhaps the closest it could get to a cry.

"Please, Great One," the woman said. She sniffled, then bowed her head. "Oh, please. He was brave, like you. My Breath, it would be yours. The Breaths of my entire family. Service for a hundred years, anything. Please, just heal him."

Lightsong closed his eyes.

"Please," the woman whispered.

"I cannot," Lightsong said.

Silence.

"I *cannot,*" Lightsong said.

"Thank you, my lord," the woman finally whispered.

Lightsong opened his eyes to see the woman being led away, weeping quietly, child clutched close to her breast. The line of people watched her go, looking miserable yet hopeful at the same time. One more petitioner had failed. That meant they would get a chance.

A chance to beg Lightsong to kill himself.

Lightsong stood suddenly, grabbing the cap off his head and tossing it aside. He rushed away, throwing open a door at the back of the room. It slammed against the wall as he stumbled through.

Servants and priests immediately followed after him. He turned on them. "Go!" he said, waving them away. Many of them showed looks of surprise, unaccustomed to any kind of forcefulness on their master's part.

"Leave me *be*!" he shouted, towering over them. Colors in the room flared brighter in response to his emotion, and the servants backed down, confused, stumbling back out into the petition hall and pulling the door closed.

Lightsong stood alone. He placed one hand against the wall, breathing in and out, other hand against his forehead. Why was he sweating so? He'd been through thousands of petitions, and many had been worse than the one he'd just seen. He'd sent pregnant women to their deaths, doomed children and parents, consigned the innocent and the faithful to misery.

There was no reason to overreact. He could take it. It was a little thing, really. Just like absorbing the Breath of a new person every week. A small price to pay. . . .

The door opened and a figure stepped in.

Lightsong didn't turn. "What do they want of me, Llarimar?" he demanded. "Do they really think I'll do it? Lightsong, the selfish? Do they really think I'd give my life for one of them?"

Llarimar was quiet for a few moments. "You offer hope, Your Grace," he finally said. "A last, unlikely hope. Hope is part of faith—part of the knowledge that someday, *one* of your followers will receive a miracle."

"And if they're wrong?" Lightsong asked. "I have no desire to die. I'm an idle man, fond of luxury. People like me don't give up their lives, even if they do happen to be gods."

Llarimar didn't reply.

"The good ones are all already dead, Scoot," Lightsong said. "Calmseer, Brighthue: those were gods who would give themselves away. The rest of us are selfish. There hasn't been a petition granted in what, three years?"

"About that, Your Grace," Llarimar said quietly.

"And why should it be otherwise?" Lightsong said, laughing a bit. "I mean, we have to *die* to heal one of them. Doesn't that strike you as ridiculous? What kind of religion encourages its members to come and petition for their god's life?" Lightsong shook his head. "It's ironic. We're gods to them only until they kill us. And I think I might know why the gods give in. It's those petitions, being forced to sit day after day, knowing that you *could* save one of them—that you probably should, since your life isn't really worth anything. That's enough to drive a man mad. Enough to drive him to kill himself!"

He smiled, glancing at his high priest. "Suicide by divine manifestation. Very dramatic."

"Shall I call off the rest of the petitions, Your Grace?" Llarimar gave no sign of being annoyed by the outburst.

"Sure, why not," Lightsong said, waving a hand. "They really need a lesson in theology. They should *already* know what a useless god I am. Send them away, tell them to come back tomorrow—assuming that they are foolish enough to do so."

"Yes, Your Grace," Llarimar said, bowing.

Doesn't that man ever get mad at me? Lightsong thought. *He, more than any, should know that I'm not a person to rely upon!*

Lightsong turned, walking away as Llarimar went back into the petition

room. No servants tried to follow him. Lightsong pushed his way through red-hued room after red-hued room, eventually finding his way to a stairwell and climbing up to the second story. This floor was open on all sides, really nothing more than a large covered patio. He walked to the far side—the one opposite the line of people.

The breeze was strong here. He felt it plucking at his robes, bringing with it scents that had traveled hundreds of miles, crossed the ocean, twisting around palm trees and finally entering the Court of Gods. He stood there for a long time, looking out over the city, toward the sea beyond. He had no desire, despite what he sometimes said, to leave his comfortable home in the court. He was not a man of jungles; he was a man of parties.

But sometimes he wished that he could at least *want* to be something else. Blushweaver's words still weighed upon him. *You'll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong. You're a god to these people. . . .*

He was. Whether he wanted to be or not. That was the frustrating part. He'd tried his best to be useless and vain. And still they came.

We could use your confidence . . . you're a better man than you give yourself credit for being.

Why did it seem that the more he demonstrated himself to be an idiot, the more convinced people became that he had some kind of hidden depths? By implication, they called him a liar in the same breath that they complimented his presumed inner virtue. Did no one understand that a man could be both likable *and* useless? Not every quick-tongued fool was a hero in disguise.

His life sense alerted him of Llarimar's return long before footsteps did. The priest walked up to join Lightsong alongside the wall. Llarimar rested his arms on the railing—which, being built for a god, was about a foot too high for the priest.

"They're gone," Llarimar said.

"Ah, very good," Lightsong said. "I do believe that we've accomplished something today. I've fled from my responsibilities, screamed at my servants, and sat about pouting. Undoubtedly, this will convince everyone that I'm even *more* noble and honorable than they previously assumed. Tomorrow, there will be twice as many petitions, and I shall continue my inexorable march toward utter madness."

"You can't go mad," Llarimar said softly. "It's impossible."

"Sure I can," Lightsong said. "I just have to concentrate long enough. You see, the great thing about madness is that it's all in your head."

Llarimar shook his head. "I see you've been restored to your normal humor."

"Scoot, you wound me. My humor is anything but normal." They stood silently for a few more minutes, Llarimar offering no chastisement or commentary on his god's actions. Just like a good little priest.

That made Lightsong think of something. "Scoot, you're my high priest."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Lightsong sighed. "You really need to pay attention to the lines I'm feeding you, Scoot. You really should have said something pithy there."

"I apologize, Your Grace."

"Just try harder next time. Anyway, you know about theology and that sort of thing, correct?"

"I've studied my share, Your Grace."

"Well then, what *is* the point—religiously—of having gods that can only heal one person, then die? It seems counterproductive to me. Easy way to depopulate your pantheon."

Llarimar leaned forward, staring out over the city. "It's complicated, Your Grace. Returned aren't just gods—they're men who died, but who decided to come back and offer blessings and knowledge. After all, only one who has died can have anything useful to say about the other side."

"True, I suppose."

"The thing is, Your Grace, Returned aren't meant to stay. We extend their lives, giving them extra time to bless us. But they're really only supposed to remain alive as long as it takes them to do what they need to."

"Need to?" Lightsong said. "That seems rather vague."

Llarimar shrugged. "Returned have . . . goals. Objectives which are their own. You knew of yours before you decided to come back, but the process of leaping across the Iridescent Wave leaves the memory fragmented. Stay long enough, and you'll remember what you came to accomplish. The petitions . . . they're a way of helping you to remember."

"So I've come back to save one person's life?" Lightsong said, frowning, but feeling embarrassed. In five years, he'd spent little time studying his own theology. But, well, that was the sort of thing priests were for.

"Not necessarily, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "You may have come back to save one person. But, more likely, there is information about the future or the afterlife that you felt you needed to share. Or perhaps some great event in which you felt you needed to participate. Remember, it was the heroic way in which you died that gave you the power to Return in the first place. What you are to do might relate to that, somehow."

Llarimar trailed off slightly, his eyes growing unfocused. "You saw something, Lightsong. On the other side, the future is visible, like a scroll that stretches into the eternal harmonics of the cosmos. Something you saw—something about the future—worried you. Rather than remaining at peace, you took the opportunity that your brave death afforded you, and you Returned to the world. Determined to fix a problem, share information, or otherwise help those who continued to live.

"Someday, once you feel that you've accomplished your task, you can use the petitions to find someone who deserves your Breath. Then you can continue your journey across the Iridescent Wave. Our job, as your followers, is to provide Breath for you and keep you alive until you can accomplish your goal, whatever it may be. In the meantime, we pry for auguries and blessings, which can be gleaned only from one who has touched the future as you have. "

Lightsong didn't respond immediately. "And if I don't believe?"

"In what, Your Grace?"

"In any of it," Lightsong said. "That Returned are gods, that these visions are anything more than random inventions of my brain. What if I don't believe that I had any purpose or plan in Returning?"

"Then maybe that's what you came back to discover."

"So . . . wait. You're saying that on the other side—where I obviously *believed* in the other side—I realized that if I Returned I wouldn't believe in the other side, so I came back with the purpose of discovering faith in the other side, which I only lost because I Returned in the first place?"

Llarimar paused. Then he smiled. "That last one breaks down a little bit in the face of logic, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, a little bit," Lightsong said, smiling back. He turned, eyes falling on the God King's palace, standing like a monument above the other court structures. "What do you think of her?"

"The new queen?" Llarimar asked. "I haven't met her, Your Grace. She won't be presented for another few days."

"Not the person. The implications."

Llarimar glanced at him. "Your Grace. That smells of an interest in politics!"

"Blah blah, yes, I know. Lightsong is a hypocrite. I'll do penance for it later. Now answer the blasted question."

Llarimar smiled. "I don't know what to think of her, Your Grace. The court of twenty years ago thought bringing a royal daughter here was a good idea."

Yes, Lightsong thought. *But that court is gone.* The gods had thought melding the royal line back into Hallandren would be a good idea. But those gods—the ones who believed they knew how to deal with the Idrian girl's arrival—were now dead. They'd left inferior replacements.

If what Llarimar said was true, then there was something important about the things Lightsong saw. Those visions of war, and the terrible sense of foreboding. For reasons he couldn't explain, it felt to him like his people were barely headfirst down a mountain slope, completely ignorant of a bottomless chasm hidden in the cleft of the lands before them.

"The full court assembly meets in judgment tomorrow, doesn't it?" Lightsong said, still looking at the black palace.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Contact Blushweaver. See if I can share a box with her during the judgments. Perhaps she will distract me. You know what a headache politics gives me."

"You can't get headaches, Your Grace."

In the distance, Lightsong could see the rejected petitioners trailing out of the gates, returning to the city, leaving their gods behind. "Could have fooled me," he said quietly.

SIRI STOOD in the dark black bedroom, wearing her shift, looking out the window. The God King's palace was higher than the surrounding wall, and the bedroom faced east. Out over the sea. She watched the distant waves, feeling the heat of the afternoon sun. While she was wearing the thin shift, the warmth was actually pleasant, and it was tempered by a cool breeze

blowing in off the ocean. The wind teased her long hair, ruffling the fabric of her shift.

She should be dead. She had spoken directly to the God King, had sat up and made a demand of him. She'd waited all morning for punishment. There had been none.

She leaned down against the windowsill, arms crossed on the stone, closing her eyes and feeling the sea breeze. A part of her was still aghast at the way she had acted. That part was growing smaller and smaller. *I've been going about things wrong here,* she thought. *I've let myself be pushed about by my fears and worries.*

She didn't usually take time to bother with fears and worries. She just did what seemed right. She was beginning to feel that she should have stood up to the God King days ago. Perhaps she wasn't being cautious enough. Perhaps punishment would still come. However, for the moment, she felt as if she'd accomplished something.

She smiled, opening her eyes, and let her hair change to a determined golden yellow.

It was time to stop being afraid.

13

I'll give it away," Vivenna said firmly.

She sat with the mercenaries in Lemex's home. It was the day after the Breaths had been forced upon her, and she had spent a restless night, letting the mercenaries and the nurse see to the disposal of Lemex's body. She didn't remember falling asleep from the exhaustion and stress of the day, but she did remember lying down to rest for a short time in the other upstairs bedroom. When she'd awoken, she'd been surprised to find that the mercenaries were still there. Apparently, they and Parlin had slept downstairs.

A night's perspective hadn't helped her much with her problems. She still had all of that filthy Breath, and she still had no idea what she was going to do in Hallandren without Lemex. At least with the Breath, she had an idea of what to do. It could be given away.

They were in Lemex's sitting room. Like most places in Hallandren, the room was swollen with colors; the walls were made from thin strips of reedlike wood, stained in bright yellows and greens. Vivenna couldn't help but notice that she saw each color more vibrantly now. She had a strangely precise sense of color—she could divide its shades and hues, understanding instinctively how close each color was to the ideal. It was like perfect pitch for the eyes.

It was very, *very* difficult not to see beauty in the colors.

Denth leaned against the far wall. Tonk Fah lounged on a couch, yawning periodically, his colorful bird perched on his foot. Parlin had gone to stand watch outside.

"Give it away, Princess?" Denth asked.

"The Breath," Vivenna said. She sat on a kitchen stool instead of one of the overly plush chairs or couches. "We will go out and find unfortunate people who have been raped by your culture, their Breath stolen, and I will give each one a Breath."

Denth shot a glace at Tonk Fah, who simply yawned.

"Princess," Denth said, "you can't give Breath away one at a time. You have to give it all away at once."

"Including your own Breath," Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. "That would leave you as a Drab."

Vivenna's stomach churned at that. The thought of not only losing the new beauty and color, but her own Breath, her soul . . . well, it was almost enough to turn her hair white. "No," she said. "That's not an option, then."

The room fell silent.

"She could Awaken stuff," Tonk Fah noted, wiggling his foot, making his bird squawk. "Stick the Breath inside of a pair of pants or something."

"That's a good point," Denth said.

"What . . . does that entail?" Vivenna asked.

"You bring something to life, Princess," Denth said. "An inanimate object. That'll draw out some of your Breath and leave the object kind of alive. Most Awakeners do it temporarily, but I don't see why you couldn't just leave the Breath there."

Awakening. Taking the souls of men and using them to create unliving monstrosities. Somehow, Vivenna felt that Austre would find that an even greater sin than simply bearing the Breath. She sighed, shaking her head. The problem with the Breath was, in a way, just a distraction—one she feared she was using to keep herself from dwelling on the lack of Lemex. What was she going to do?

Denth sat down in a chair beside her, resting his feet on the sitting table. He kept himself better groomed than Tonk Fah, his dark hair pulled back into a neat tail, his face clean-shaven. "I hate being a mercenary," he said. "You know why?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"No job security," Denth said, leaning back in his chair. "The kinds of things we do, they tend to be dangerous and unpredictable. Our employers have a habit of dying off on us."

"Though usually not from the chills," Tonk Fah noted. "Swords tend to be the method of choice."

"Take our current predicament," Denth said. "No more employer. That leaves us without any real direction."

Vivenna froze. *Does that mean their contract is over? They know I'm a princess of Idris. What will they do with that information? Is that why they stayed here last night, rather than leaving? Are they planning to blackmail me?*

Denth eyed her. "You see that?" he asked, turning to Tonk Fah.

"Yeah," Tonk Fah said. "She's thinking it."

Denth leaned back further in his chair. "This is *exactly* what I'm talking about. Why does everyone assume that when a mercenary's contract is over, he'll betray them? You think we go around stabbing people for the fun of it? Do you think a surgeon has this problem? Do people worry that the moment they're done paying him, he'll laugh maniacally and cut off their toes?"

"*I* like cutting off toes," Tonk Fah noted.

"That's different," Denth said. "You wouldn't do it simply because your contract ran out, would you?"

"Nah," Tonk Fah said. "Toes is toes."

Vivenna rolled her eyes. "Is there a point to this?"

"The point is, Princess," Denth said, "you were just thinking that we were going to betray you. Maybe rob you blind or sell you to slavery or something."

"Nonsense," Vivenna said. "I was thinking nothing of the sort."

"I'm sure," Denth replied. "Mercenary work is very respectable—it's legal in almost every kingdom I know. We're just as much a part of the community as the baker or the fishmonger."

"Not that we pay the tax collectors," Tonk Fah added. "We tend to stab them for the fun of it."

Vivenna just shook her head.

Denth leaned forward, speaking in a more serious tone. "What I'm trying to say, Princess, is that we're not criminals. We're employees. Your friend Lemex was our boss. Now he's dead. I figure that our contract transfers to you now, if you want it."

Vivenna felt a slight glimmer of hope. But could she trust them? Despite Denth's speech, she found it hard to have faith in the motives and altruism of a pair of men who fought for money. However, they hadn't taken advan-

tage of Lemex's sickness, and they *had* stayed around even after they could have robbed the place and left while she was asleep.

"All right," she said. "How much is left on your contract?"

"No idea," Denth said. "Jewels handles that kind of thing."

"Jewels?" Vivenna asked.

"Third member of the group," Tonk Fah said. "She's off doing Jewels stuff."

Vivenna frowned. "How many of you are there?"

"Just three," Denth said.

"Unless you count pets," Tonk Fah said, balancing his bird on his foot.

"She'll be back in a while," Denth said. "She stopped in last night, but you were asleep. Anyway, I know we've got at least a few months left on our contract, and we were paid half up front. Even if you decide not to pay the rest, we probably owe you a few more weeks."

Tonk Fah nodded. "So if there's anyone you want killed, now would be the time."

Vivenna stared, and Tonk Fah chuckled.

"You're really going to have to get used to our terrible senses of humor, Princess," Denth said. "Assuming, of course, you're going to keep us around."

"I've already implied that I'll keep you," Vivenna said.

"All right," Denth replied. "But what are you going to do with us? Why did you even come to the city?"

Vivenna didn't answer immediately. *No point in holding back,* she thought. *They know the most dangerous secret—my identity—already.* "I'm here to rescue my sister," she said. "To sneak her out of the God King's palace and see her returned to Idris unharmed."

The mercenaries fell silent. Finally, Tonk Fah whistled. "Ambitious," he noted as his parrot mimicked the whistle.

"She *is* a princess," Denth said. "They tend to be ambitious sorts."

"Siri isn't ready to deal with Hallandren," Vivenna said, leaning forward. "My father sent her in my place, but I cannot stand the thought of her serving as the God King's wife. Unfortunately, if we simply grab her and go, Hallandren will likely attack my homeland. We need to make her disappear in a way that isn't traceable to my people. If necessary, we can substitute me for my sister."

Denth scratched his head.

"Well?" Vivenna asked.

"Little bit out of our realm of expertise," Denth said.

"We usually hit things," Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. "Or, at least, keep things from getting hit. Lemex kept us on partially just as bodyguards."

"Why wouldn't he just send for a couple of Idris soldiers to protect him?"

Denth and Tonk Fah exchanged a look.

"How can I put this delicately?" Denth said. "Princess, your Lemex was embezzling money from the king and spending it on Breath."

"Lemex was a patriot!" Vivenna said immediately.

"That may have been the case," Denth said. "But even a good priest isn't above slipping himself a few coins out of the coffer, so to speak. I think your Lemex figured it would be better to have outside muscle, rather than inside loyalists, protecting him."

Vivenna fell silent. It was still hard to imagine the thoughtful, clever, and passionate man represented in Lemex's letters as a thief. Yet it was also hard to imagine Lemex holding as much Breath as he obviously had.

But embezzling? Stealing from Idris itself?

"You learn things as a mercenary," Denth said, resting back with hands behind his head. "You fight enough people, and you figure you start to understand them. You stay alive by anticipating them. The thing is, people aren't simple. Even Idrians."

"Boring, yes," Tonk Fah added. "But not simple."

"Your Lemex, he was involved in some big plans," Denth said. "I honestly think he *was* a patriot. There are many intrigues going on in this city, Princess—some of the projects Lemex had us working on had a grand scope, and were for the good of Idris, as near as I can tell. I guess he just thought he should be compensated a little for his patriotism."

"Quite an amiable fellow, actually," Tonk Fah said. "Didn't want to bother your father. So he just did the figures on his own, gave himself a raise, and indicated in his reports that his costs were far greater than they really were."

Vivenna fell silent, letting herself digest the words. How could anyone who stole money from Idris also be a patriot? How could a person faithful to Austre end up with several hundred BioChromatic Breaths?

She shook her head wryly. *I saw men who placed themselves above others, and I saw them cast down,* she quoted to herself. It was one of the Five Visions. She shouldn't judge Lemex, particularly now that he was dead. "Wait," she said, eyeing the mercenaries. "You said that you were just bodyguards. What, then, were you doing helping Lemex with 'projects'?"

The two men shared a look.

"Told you she was smart," Tonk Fah said. "Comes from not being a mercenary."

"We *are* bodyguards, Princess," Denth said. "However, we're not without certain . . . skills. We can make things happen."

"Things?" Vivenna asked.

Denth shrugged. "We know people. That's part of what makes us useful. Let me think about this issue with your sister. Maybe I'll be able to come up with some ideas. It's a little like kidnapping. . . ."

"Which," Tonk Fah said, "we're not too fond of. Did we mention that?"

"Yes," Vivenna said. "Bad business. No money. What were these 'projects' Lemex was working on?"

"I'm not exactly sure of the whole of them," Denth admitted. "We only saw pieces—running errands, arranging meetings, intimidating people. It had something to do with work for your father. We can find out for you, if you want."

Vivenna nodded. "I do."

Denth stood. "All right," he said. He walked past Tonk Fah's couch, smacking the larger man's leg, causing the bird to squawk. "Tonk. Come on. Time to ransack the house."

Tonk Fah yawned and sat up.

"Wait!" Vivenna said. "Ransack the house?"

"Sure," Denth said, heading up the stairs. "Break out any hidden safes. Search through papers and files. Figure out what old Lemex was up to."

"He won't care much," Tonk Fah said, standing. "Being dead and all."

Vivenna shivered. She still wished she'd been able to see that Lemex got a proper Idrian burial, rather than sending him off to the Hallandren charnel house. Having a pair of toughs search his belongings felt unseemly.

Denth must have noticed her discomfort. "We don't have to, if you don't want us to."

"Sure," Tonk Fah said. "We'll never know what Lemex was up to, though."

"Continue," Vivenna said. "But I'm going to supervise."

"Actually, I doubt that you will," Denth said.

"And why is that?"

"Because," Denth said. "Now, I know nobody ever asks mercenaries for their opinion. You see—"

"Oh, just get on with it," Vivenna said with annoyance, though she immediately chastised herself for her snappishness. What was wrong with her? The last few days must be wearing on her.

Denth just smiled, as if he found her outburst incredibly amusing. "Today's the day when the Returned hold their Court Assembly, Princess."

"So?" Vivenna asked with forced calmness.

"So," Denth replied, "it's also the day when your sister will be presented to the gods. I suspect that you'll want to go get a good look at her, see how she's holding up. If you're going to do that, you'll want to get moving. Court Assembly will begin pretty soon."

Vivenna folded her arms, not moving. "I've been tutored all about these things, Denth. Regular people can't just walk into the Court of Gods. If you want to watch the judgments at the Court Assembly, you either have to be favored of one of the gods, be extremely influential, or you have to draw and win the lottery."

"True," Denth said, leaning against the banister. "If only we knew someone with enough BioChromatic Breaths to instantly be considered important, and therefore gain entrance to the court without being questioned."

"Ah, Denth," Tonk Fah said. "Someone has to have at least fifty Breaths to be considered worthy! That's a terribly high number."

Vivenna paused. "And . . . how many Breaths do I have?"

"Oh, around five hundred or so," Denth said. "At least, that's what Lemex claimed. I'm inclined to believe him. You are, after all, making the carpet shine."

She glanced down, noticing for the first time that she was creating a pocket of enhanced color around her. It wasn't very distinct, but it *was* noticeable.

"You'd better get going, Princess," Denth said, continuing to clomp up the stairs. "You'll be late."

SIRI SAT NERVOUSLY, blond with excitement, trying to contain herself as the serving women did her hair. Her Wedding Jubilation—something she found rather inappropriately named—was finally over, and it was time for her formal presentation before the Hallandren gods.

She was probably too excited. It hadn't really been that long. Yet the prospect of finally leaving—if only to attend court—made her almost giddy. She would finally get to interact with someone other than priests, scribes, and servants. She'd finally get to meet some of those gods that she'd heard so much about.

Plus, *he*'d be there at the presentation. The only times she'd been able to see the God King had been during their nightly staring matches, when he was shrouded in shadow. Today, she would at last see him in the light.

She smiled, inspecting herself in a large mirror. The servants had done her hair in an amazingly intricate style, part of it braided, the rest allowed to flow free. They'd tied several ribbons into the braids and also woven them into her free-flowing hair. The ribbons shimmered as she turned her head. Her family would have been mortified at the ostentatious colors. Siri grinned mischievously, making her hair turn a brighter shade of golden blond to better contrast with the ribbons.

The serving women smiled approvingly, a couple letting out quiet "ooo"s at the transformation. Siri sat back, hands in her lap as she inspected her clothing choices for the court appearance. The garments were ornate—not as complex as the ones she wore to the bedchambers, but far more formal than her everyday choices.

Red was the theme for the serving women and priests today. That made Siri want to choose something else. Eventually, she decided on gold, and she pointed at the two golden gowns, having the women bring them forward so she could look at them more closely. Unfortunately, as she did so, the women fetched three more golden dresses from a rolling wardrobe out in the hallway.

Siri sighed. It was as if they were determined to keep her from having a reasonably simple choice. She just hated seeing so many options disappear each day. If only . . .

She paused. "Could I try them *all* on?"

The serving women glanced at each other, a little confused. They nodded toward her, their expressions conveying a simple message. *Of course you*

can. Siri felt foolish, but in Idris she'd never had a choice before. She smiled, standing and letting them take off her robe and then dress her in the first of the gowns, careful not to mess up her hair. Siri inspected herself, noting that the neckline was rather low. She was willing to splurge on color, but the amount of flesh Hallandrens showed still felt scandalous.

She nodded, letting them take off the gown. Then they dressed her in the next one—a two-piece garment with a separate corset. Once they were finished, Siri eyed this new outfit in the mirror. She liked it, but she wanted to try the others as well. So, after spinning about and inspecting the back, she nodded and moved on.

It was frivolous. But why was she so worried about being frivolous? Her father wasn't around to regard her with that stern, disapproving face of his. Vivenna was an entire kingdom away. Siri was queen of the Hallandren people. Shouldn't she try to learn their ways? She smiled at the ridiculous justification, but went on to the next gown anyway.

14

It's raining," Lightsong noted.

"Very astute, Your Grace," Llarimar said, walking beside his god.

"I'm not fond of rain."

"So you have often noted, Your Grace."

"I'm a god," Lightsong said. "Shouldn't I have power over the weather? How can it rain if I don't want it to?"

"There are currently twenty-five gods in the court, Your Grace. Perhaps there are more who desire rain than those who don't."

Lightsong's robes of gold and red rustled as he walked. The grass was cool and damp beneath his sandaled toes, but a group of servants carried a wide canopy over him. Rain fell softly on the cloth. In T'Telir, rainfalls were common, but they were never very strong.

Lightsong would have liked to have seen a true rainstorm, like people said occurred out in the jungles. "I'll take a poll then," Lightsong said. "Of the other gods. See how many of them wanted it to rain today."

"If you wish, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "It won't prove much."

"It'll prove whose fault this is," Lightsong said. "And . . . if it turns out that most of us want it to stop raining, perhaps that will start a theological crisis."

Llarimar, of course, didn't seem bothered by the concept of a god trying to undermine his own religion. "Your Grace," he said, "our doctrine is *quite* sound, I assure you."

"And if the gods don't want it to rain, yet it still does?"

"Would you like it to be sunny all the time, Your Grace?"

Lightsong shrugged. "Sure."

"And the farmers?" Llarimar said. "Their crops would die without the rain."

"It can rain on the crops," Lightsong said, "just not in the city. A few selective weather patterns shouldn't be too much for a god to accomplish."

"The people need water to drink, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "The streets need to be washed clean. And what of the plants in the city? The beautiful trees—even this grass that you enjoy walking across—would die if the rain did not fall."

"Well," Lightsong said, "I could just *will* them to continue living."

"And that is what you do, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "Your soul knows that rain is best for the city, and so it rains. Despite what your consciousness thinks."

Lightsong frowned. "By that argument, you could claim that *anyone* was a god, Llarimar."

"Not just *anyone* comes back from the dead, Your Grace. Nor do they have the power to heal the sick, and they certainly don't have your ability to foresee the future."

Good points, those, Lightsong thought as they approached the arena. The large, circular structure was at the back of the Court of Gods, outside of the ring of palaces that surrounded the courtyard. Lightsong's entourage moved inside—red canopy still held above him—and entered the sand-covered arena yard. Then they moved up a ramp toward the seating area.

The arena had four rows of seats for ordinary people—stone benches, accommodating T'Telir citizens who were favored, lucky, or rich enough to get themselves into an assembly session. The upper reaches of the arena were reserved for the Returned. Here—close enough to hear what was said on the arena floor, yet far enough back to remain stately—were the boxes. Ornately carved in stone, they were large enough to hold a god's entire entourage.

Lightsong could see that several of his colleagues had arrived, marked by the colorful canopies that sat above their boxes. Lifeblesser was there, as was Mercystar. They passed by the empty box usually reserved for Lightsong and made their way around the ring and approached a box topped by a green pavilion. Blushweaver lounged inside. Her green and silver dress was lavish and re-

vealing, as always. Despite its rich trim and embroidery, it was little more than a long swath of cloth with a hole in the center for her head and some ties. That left it completely open on both sides from shoulder to calf, and Blushweaver's thighs curved out lusciously on either side. She sat up, smiling.

Lightsong took a deep breath. Blushweaver always treated him kindly and she certainly did have a high opinion of him, but he felt like he had to be on guard at all times when he was around her. A man could be taken in by a woman such as she.

Taken in, then never released.

"Lightsong, dear," she said, smiling more deeply as Lightsong's servants scuttled forward, setting up his chair, footrest, and snack table.

"Blushweaver," Lightsong replied. "My high priest tells me that you're to blame for this dreary weather."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, and to the side—standing with the other priests—Llarimar flushed. "I like the rain," Blushweaver finally said, lounging back on her couch. "It's . . . different. I like things that are different."

"Then you should be thoroughly bored by me, my dear," Lightsong said, seating himself and taking a handful of grapes—already peeled—from the bowl on his snack table.

"Bored?" Blushweaver asked.

"I strive for nothing if not mediocrity, and mediocrity is *hardly* different. In fact, I should say that it's highly in fashion in court these days."

"You shouldn't say such things," Blushweaver said. "The people might start to believe you."

"You mistake me. That's why I say them. I figure if I can't do properly deific miracles like control the weather, then I might as well settle for the lesser miracle of being the one who tells the truth."

"Hum," she replied, stretching back, the tips of her fingers wiggling as she sighed in contentment. "Our priests say that the purpose of the gods is not to play with weather or prevent disasters, but to provide visions and service to the people. Perhaps this attitude of yours is not the best way to see to their interests."

"You're right, of course," Lightsong said. "I've just had a revelation. Mediocrity *isn't* the best way to serve our people."

"What is, then?"

"Medium rare on a bed of sweet-potato medallions," he said, popping a

grape in his mouth. "With a slight garnish of garlic and a light white wine sauce."

"You're incorrigible," she said, finishing her stretch.

"I am what the universe made me to be, my dear."

"You bow before the whims of the universe, then?"

"What else would I do?"

"Fight it," Blushweaver said. She narrowed her eyes, absently reaching to take one of the grapes from Lightsong's hand. "Fight with everything, force the universe to bow to you instead."

"That's a charming concept, Blushweaver. But I believe that universe and I are in slightly different weight categories."

"I think you're wrong."

"Are you saying I'm fat?"

She regarded him with a flat glance. "I'm saying that you needn't be so humble, Lightsong. You're a *god*."

"A god who can't even make it stop raining."

"*I* want it to storm and tempest. Maybe this drizzle is the compromise between us."

Lightsong popped another grape in his mouth, squishing it between his teeth, feeling the sweet juice leak onto his palate. He thought for a moment, chewing. "Blushweaver, dear," he finally said. "Is there some kind of subtext to our current conversation? Because, as you might know, I am absolutely *terrible* with subtext. It gives me a headache."

"You can't get headaches," Blushweaver said.

"Well I can't get subtext either. Far too subtle for me. It takes effort to understand, and effort is—unfortunately—against my religion."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. "A new tenet for those who worship you?"

"Oh, not that religion," Lightsong said. "I'm secretly a worshipper of Austre. His is such a delightfully blunt theology—black, white, no bothering with complications. Faith without any bothersome thinking."

Blushweaver stole another grape. "You just don't know Austrism well enough. It's complex. If you're looking for something *really* simple, you should try the Pahn Kahl faith."

Lightsong frowned. "Don't they just worship the Returned, like the rest of us?"

"No. They have their own religion."

"But everyone knows the Pahn Kahl are practically Hallandren."

Blushweaver shrugged, watching the stadium floor below.

"And how exactly did we get onto this tangent, anyway?" Lightsong said. "I swear, my dear. Sometimes our conversations remind me of a broken sword."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sharp as hell," Lightsong said, "but lacking a point."

Blushweaver snorted quietly. "You're the one who asked to meet with me, Lightsong."

"Yes, but we both know that you wanted me to. What are you planning, Blushweaver?"

Blushweaver rolled her grape between her fingers. "Wait," she said.

Lightsong sighed, waving for a servant to bring him some nuts. One placed a bowl on the table; then another came forward and began to crack them for him. "First you imply that I should join with you, now you won't tell me what you want me to do? I swear, woman. Someday, your ridiculous sense of drama is going to cause cataclysmic problems—like, for instance, boredom in your companions."

"It's not drama," she said. "It's respect." She nodded directly across the arena, where the God King's box still stood empty, golden throne sitting on a pedestal above the box itself.

"Ah. Feeling patriotic today, are we?"

"It's more that I'm curious."

"About?"

"Her."

"The queen?"

Blushweaver gave him a flat stare. "Of course, her. Who else would I be speaking about?"

Lightsong counted off the days. It had been a week. "Huh," he said to himself. "Her period of isolation is over, then?"

"You really should pay more attention, Lightsong."

He shrugged. "Time tends to pass you by more quickly when you take no notice of it, my dear. In that, it's remarkably similar to most women I know." With that, he accepted a handful of nuts, then settled back to wait.

APPARENTLY, THE PEOPLE OF T'TELIR weren't fond of carriages—not even to carry gods. Siri sat, somewhat bemused, as a group of servants carried her chair across the grass toward a large, circular structure at the back of the Court of Gods. It was raining. She didn't care. She'd been cooped up for far too long.

She turned, twisting in her chair, looking back over a group of serving women who carried her dress's long golden train, keeping it off the wet grass. Around them all walked more women, who held a large canopy to shield Siri from the rain.

"Could you . . . move that aside?" Siri asked. "Let the rain fall on me?"

The serving women glanced at one another.

"Just for a little bit," Siri said. "I promise."

The women shared frowns, but slowed, allowing Siri's porters to pull ahead and expose her to the rain. She looked up, smiling as the drizzle fell on her face. *Seven days is* far *too long to spend indoors,* she decided. She basked for a long moment, enjoying the cool wetness on her skin and clothing. The grass looked inviting. She glanced back again. "I could walk, you know." *Feel my toes on those green blades. . . .*

The serving women looked very, very uncomfortable about that concept.

"Or not," Siri said, turning around as the women sped up, again covering the sky with their canopy. Walking was probably a bad idea, considering her dress's long train. She'd eventually chosen a gown far more daring than anything she'd ever worn before. The neckline was a touch low, and it had no sleeves. It also had a curious design that covered the front of her legs with a short skirt, yet was floor-length in back. She'd picked it partially for the novelty, though she blushed every time she thought of how much leg it showed.

They soon arrived at the arena and her porters carried her up into it. Siri was interested to see that it had no ceiling and had a sand-covered floor. Just above the floor, a colorful group of people were gathering on ranks of benches. Though some of them carried umbrellas, many ignored the light rain, chatting amiably among themselves. Siri smiled at the crowd; a hundred different colors and as many different clothing styles were represented. It was good to see some variety again, even if that variety was somewhat garish.

Her porters carried her up to a large stone cleft built into the side of the

building. Here, her women slid the canopy's poles into holes in the stone, allowing it to stand freely to cover the entire box. Servants scuttled about, getting things ready, and her porters lowered her chair. She stood, frowning. She was finally free of the palace. And yet it appeared she was going to have to sit above everyone else. Even the other gods—whom she assumed were in the other canopied boxes—were far away and separated from her by walls.

How is it that they can make me feel alone, even when surrounded by hundreds of people? She turned to one of her serving women. "The God King. Where is he?"

The woman gestured toward the other boxes like Siri's.

"He's in one of them?" Siri asked.

"No, Vessel," the woman said, eyes downcast. "He will not arrive until the gods are all here."

Ah, Siri thought. *Makes sense, I guess.*

She sat back in her chair as several servants prepared food. To the side, a minstrel began to play a flute, as if to drown out the sounds of the people below. She would rather have heard the people. Still, she decided not to let herself get into a bad mood. At least she was outside, and she could *see* other people, even if she couldn't interact with them. She smiled to herself, leaning forward, elbows on knees, as she studied the exotic colors below.

What was she to make of T'Telir people? They were just so remarkably diverse. Some had dark skin, which meant they were from the edges of the Hallandren kingdom. Others had yellow hair, or even strange hair colors—blue and green—that came, Siri assumed, from dyes.

All wore brilliant clothing, as if there were no other option. Ornate hats were popular, both on men and women. Clothing ranged from vests and shorts to long robes and gowns. *How much time must they spend shopping!* It was difficult enough for her to choose what to wear, and she had only about a dozen choices each day—and no hats. After she'd refused the first few, the servants had stopped offering them.

Entourage after entourage arrived bearing a different set of colors—a hue and a metallic, usually. She counted the boxes. There was room for about fifty gods, but the court had only a couple of dozen. Twenty-five, wasn't it? In each procession, she saw a figure standing taller than the others. Some—mostly the women—were carried on chairs or couches. The men generally walked, some wearing intricate robes, others wearing nothing more than

sandals and skirt. Siri leaned forward, studying one god as he walked right by her box. His bare chest made her blush, but it let her see his well-muscled body and toned flesh.

He glanced at her, then nodded his head slightly in respect. His servants and priests bowed almost to the ground. The god passed on, having said nothing.

She sat back in her chair, shaking her head as one of the servants offered her food. There were still four or five gods left to arrive. Apparently, the Hallandren deities weren't as punctual as Bluefingers's schedule-keeping had led her to believe.

VIVENNA STEPPED THROUGH THE GATES, passing into the Hallandren Court of Gods, which was dominated by a group of large palaces. She hesitated, and small groups of people passed through on either side of her, though there wasn't much of a crowd.

Denth had been right; it had been easy for her to get into the court. The priests at the gate had waved Vivenna through without even asking her identity. They had even let Parlin pass, assuming him to be her attendant. She turned back, glancing at the priests in their blue robes. She could see bubbles of colorfulness around them, indications of their strong BioChroma.

She'd been tutored about this. The priests guarding the gates had enough Breath to get them to the First Heightening, the state at which a person gained the ability to distinguish levels of Breath in other people. Vivenna had it too. It wasn't that auras or colors looked different to her. In fact, the ability to distinguish Breath was similar to the perfect pitch she had gained. Other people heard the same sounds she did, she just had the ability to pick them apart.

She saw how close a person had to get to one of the priests before the colors increased, and she saw exactly how much more colorful those hues became. This information let her know instinctively that each of the priests was of the First Heightening. Parlin had one Breath. The ordinary citizens, who had to present papers to gain entrance to the court, also each had only one Breath. She could tell how strong that Breath was, and if the person was sick or not.

The priests each had exactly fifty Breaths, as did the majority of the

wealthier individuals entering through the gates. A fair number had at least two hundred Breaths, enough for the Second Heightening and the perfect pitch it granted. Only a couple had more Breaths than Vivenna, who had reached all the way to the Third Heightening and the perfect color perception it granted.

She turned away from her study of the crowd. She'd been tutored about the Heightenings, but she'd never expected to experience one firsthand. She felt dirty. Perverse. Particularly because the colors were just so *beautiful.*

Her tutors had explained how the court was composed of a wide circle of palaces, but they had not mentioned how each palace was so harmoniously balanced in color. Each was a work of art, utilizing subtle color gradients that normal people just wouldn't be able to appreciate. These sat on a perfect, uniformly green lawn. It was trimmed carefully, and it was marred by neither road nor walkway. Vivenna stepped onto it, Parlin at her side, and she felt an urge to kick off her shoes and walk barefoot in the dew-moistened grass. That wouldn't be appropriate at all, and she stifled the impulse.

The drizzle was finally starting to let up, and Parlin lowered the umbrella he'd bought to keep them both dry. "So, this is it," he said, shaking off the umbrella. "The Court of Gods."

Vivenna nodded.

"Good place to graze sheep."

"I doubt that," she said quietly.

Parlin frowned. "Goats, then?" he said finally.

Vivenna sighed, and they joined the small procession walking across the grass toward a large structure outside the circle of palaces. She'd been worried about standing out—after all, she still wore her simple Idrian dress, with its high neck, practical fabric, and muted colors. She was beginning to realize that there just *wasn't* a way to stand out in T'Telir.

The people around her wore such a stunning variety of costumes that she wondered who had the imagination to design them all. Some were as modest as Vivenna's and others even had muted colors—though these were usually accented by bright scarves or hats. Modesty in both design and color was obviously unfashionable, but not nonexistent.

It's all about drawing attention, she realized. *The whites and faded colors are a reaction against the bright colors. But because everyone tries so hard to look distinctive, nobody does!*

Feeling a little more secure, she glanced at Parlin, who seemed more at peace now that they were away from the larger crowds in the city below. "Interesting buildings," he said. "The people wear so much color, but that palace is just one color. Wonder why that is."

"It's not one color. It's many different shades of the same color."

Parlin shrugged. "Red is red."

How could she explain? Each red was different, like notes on a musical scale. The walls were of pure red. The roof tiles, side columns, and other ornamentations were of slightly different shades, each distinct and intentional. The columns, for instance, formed stepping fifths of color, harmonizing with the base tint of the walls.

It was like a symphony of hues. The building had obviously been constructed for a person who had achieved the Third Heightening, as only such a person would be able to see the ideal resonance. To others . . . well, it was just a bunch of red.

They passed the red palace, approaching the arena. Entertainment was central to the lives of the Hallandren gods. After all, one couldn't expect gods to do anything useful with their time. Often they were diverted in their palaces or on the courtyard lawn, but for particularly large events, there was the arena—which also served as the location of Hallandren legislative debates. Today, the priests would argue for the sport of their deities.

Vivenna and Parlin waited their turn as the people crowded around the arena entrance. Vivenna glanced toward another gateway, wondering why nobody used it. The answer was made manifest as a figure approached. He was surrounded by servants, some carrying a canopy. All were dressed in blue and silver, matching their leader, who stood a good head taller than the others. He gave off a BioChromatic aura such as Vivenna had never seen—though, admittedly, she'd been able to see them for only a few hours. His bubble of enhanced color was enormous; it extended nearly thirty feet. To her First Heightening senses, the god's Breath registered as infinite. Immeasurable. For the first time, Vivenna could see that there *was* something different about the Returned. They weren't just Awakeners with more power; it was like they had only a single Breath, but that Breath was so immensely powerful that it single-handedly propelled them to the upper Heightenings.

The god entered the arena through the open gateway. As she watched him, Vivenna's sense of awe dissipated. There was an arrogance in this

man's posture, a dismissiveness to the way he entered freely while others waited their turn at an overcrowded entrance.

To keep him alive, Vivenna thought, *he has to absorb a person's Breath each week.*

She'd let herself become too relaxed, and she felt her revulsion return. Color and beauty couldn't cover up such enormous conceit, nor could it hide the sin of being a parasite living on the common people.

The god disappeared into the arena. Vivenna waited, thinking for a time about her own BioChroma and what it meant. She was completely shocked when a man beside her suddenly lifted off the ground.

The man rose into the air, lifted by his unusually long cloak. The cloth had stiffened, looking a little like a hand as it held the man up high so he could see over the crowd. *How does it do that?* She'd been told that Breath could give life to objects, but what did "life" mean? It seemed as if the fibers in the cloak were taut, like muscles, but how did it lift something so much heavier than it was?

The man descended to the ground. He muttered something Vivenna couldn't hear, and his BioChromatic aura grew stronger as he recovered his Breath from the cloak. "We should be moving again soon," the man said to his friends. "The crowd is thinning up ahead."

Indeed, soon the crowd started to progress. It wasn't long before Vivenna and Parlin entered the arena itself. They moved through the stone benches, choosing a place that wasn't too crowded, and Vivenna looked urgently through the boxes set above. The building was ornate, but not really very big, and so it didn't take her long to locate Siri.

When she did, her heart sank. *My . . . sister,* Vivenna thought with a chill. *My poor sister.*

Siri was dressed in a scandalous golden dress that didn't even come down to her knees. It also had a plunging neckline. Siri's hair, which even she should have been able to keep a dark brown, was instead the golden yellow of enjoyment, and there were deep red ribbons woven through it. She was being attended by dozens of servants.

"Look what they've done to her," Vivenna said. "She must be frightened senseless, forced to wear something like that, forced to keep her hair a color that matches her clothing . . ." *Forced to be slave to the God King.*

Parlin's square-jawed face grew hard. He didn't often get angry, but

Vivenna could see it in him now. She agreed. Siri was being exploited; they were carrying her around and displaying her like some kind of trophy. It seemed to Vivenna a statement. They were saying they could take a chaste, innocent Idris woman and do whatever they wished with her.

What I'm doing is right, Vivenna thought with growing determination. *Coming to Hallandren* was *the best thing to do. Lemex might be dead, but I have to press onward. I have to find a way.*

I have to save my sister.

"Vivenna?" Parlin said.

"Hum?" Vivenna asked, distracted.

"Why is everyone starting to bow?"

SIRI PLAYED idly with one of the tassels on her dress. The final god was seating himself in his box. *That's twenty-five,* she thought. *That should be all of them.*

Suddenly, out in the audience, people began to rise, then kneel to the ground. Siri stood, searching anxiously. What was she missing? Had the God King arrived, or was this something else? Even the gods had gone down on their knees, though they didn't prostrate themselves as the mortals did. They all seemed to be bowing toward Siri. *Some sort of ritual greeting for their new queen?*

Then she saw it. Her dress exploded with color, the stone at her feet gained luster, and her very skin became more vibrant. In front of her, a white serving bowl began to shine; then it seemed to stretch, the white color splitting into the colors of the rainbow.

A serving woman tugged on Siri's sleeve from where she knelt below. "Vessel," the woman whispered, "behind you!"

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Breath catching in her chest, Siri turned. She found *him* standing behind her, though she had no idea how he had arrived. There was no entrance back there, just the stone wall.

He wore white. She hadn't expected that. Something about his Bio-Chroma made the pure white split as she'd seen before, breaking up like light passed through a prism. Now, in daylight, she could finally see this properly. His clothing seemed to stretch, forming a robe-shaped rainbow in a colorful aura around him.

And he was young. Far younger than her shadowed meetings had suggested. He had supposedly reigned in Hallandren for decades, yet the man standing behind her appeared to be no more than twenty. She stared at him, awed, mouth opening slightly, and any words she had planned to say escaped her. This man *was* a god. The very air distorted around him. How could she have not seen it? How could she possibly have treated him as she had? She felt like a fool.

He regarded her, expression blank and unreadable, face so controlled that he reminded Siri of Vivenna. Vivenna. She wouldn't have been so belligerent. She would have deserved marriage to such a majestic creature.

The serving woman hissed quietly, tugging again at Siri's dress. Belatedly, Siri dropped to her knees on the stone, the long train of her dress flapping slightly in the wind behind her.

BLUSHWEAVER KNELT OBEDIENTLY on her cushion. Lightsong, however, remained standing, looking across the stadium toward a man he could barely see. The God King wore white, as he often did, for dramatic effect. As the only being to have achieved the Tenth Heightening, the God King had such a strong aura that he could draw color even from something colorless.

Blushweaver glanced up at Lightsong.

"Why do we kneel?" Lightsong asked.

"That's our king!" Blushweaver hissed. "Drop down, fool."

"What will happen if I don't?" Lightsong said. "They can't execute me. I'm a god."

"You could hurt our cause!"

"Our cause"? Lightsong thought. *One meeting and I'm already part of her plans?*

However, he wasn't so foolish that he would needlessly earn the God King's ire. Why risk his perfect life, full of people who would carry his chair through the rain and shell his nuts for him? He knelt down on his cushion. The God King's superiority was arbitrary, much like Lightsong's divinity—both part of a grand game of make-believe.

But he'd found that imaginary things were often the only items of real substance in people's lives.

SIRI BREATHED QUICKLY, kneeling on the stone before her husband. The entire arena was hushed and still. Eyes downcast, she could still see Susebron's white-clothed feet in front of her. Even they gave off an aura of color, the white straps of his sandals bending out colorful ribbons.

Two coils of colorful rope hit the ground on either side of the God King. Siri watched as the ropes twisted with a life of their own, carefully wrapping around Susebron and pulling him into the air. His white robes fluttered as he was towed up through the space between the canopy and the back wall. Siri leaned forward, watching the ropes deliver her husband to a stone outcropping above. He sat back into a golden throne. Beside him, a

pair of Awakener priests commanded their living ropes to roll up around their arms and shoulders.

The God King stretched out his hand. The people stood up—their chatter beginning again—and reseated themselves. *So . . . he's not going to sit with me,* she thought as she rose. A part of her was relieved, though another was just as frustrated. She'd been getting over her awe of being in Hallandren and being married to a god. Now he'd gone and impressed her all over again. Troubled, she sat and stared out over the crowds, barely watching as a group of priests entered the arena below.

What was she to make of Susebron? He couldn't be a god. Not really. Could he?

Austre was the true God of men, the one who *sent* the Returned. The Hallandren had worshipped him too, before the Manywar and the exile of the royal family. Only after that had they fallen, becoming pagans, worshipping the Iridescent Tones: BioChromatic Breath, the Returned, and art in general.

And yet, Siri had never seen Austre. She'd been taught about him, but what was one to make of a creature like the God King? That divine halo of color wasn't something that she could ignore. She began to understand just how the people of Hallandren—after nearly being destroyed by their enemies, then being saved by the diplomatic skills of Peacegiver the Blessed—could look to the Returned for divine guidance.

She sighed, glancing to the side as a figure walked up the steps toward her box. It was Bluefingers—hands stained with ink, characteristically scribbling away on a ledger even as he entered her pavilion. He glanced up at the God King, nodded to himself, then made another annotation on his ledger. "I see that His Immortal Majesty is positioned and that you are properly displayed, Vessel."

"Displayed?"

"Of course," Bluefingers said. "That is the main purpose of your visit here. The Returned didn't get much of a chance to see you when you first came to us."

Siri shivered, trying to maintain a better posture. "Shouldn't they be paying attention to the priests down there? Instead of studying me, I mean."

"Probably," Bluefingers said, not looking up from his ledger. "In my experience, they rarely do what they're supposed to." He didn't seem particularly reverent toward them.

Siri let the conversation lapse, thinking. Bluefingers had never explained his odd warning the other night. *Things are not what they seem.* "Bluefingers," she said. "About the thing you told me the other night. The—"

He immediately shot her a look—eyes wide and insistent—cutting her off. He turned back to his ledger. The message was obvious. Not right now.

Siri sighed, resisting the urge to slump down. Below, priests of various colors stood on short platforms, debating despite the drizzling rain. She could hear them quite well, yet little of what they said made sense to her—the current debate appeared to have something to do with the way refuse and sewage was handled in the city.

"Bluefingers," she asked. "Are they really gods?"

The scribe hesitated, then finally looked up from his ledger. "Vessel?"

"The Returned. Do you really think that they're divine? That they can see the future?"

"I . . . don't think I'm the right one to ask, Vessel. Let me fetch one of the priests. He can answer your questions. Just give me a—"

"No," Siri said, causing him to stop. "I don't want a priest's opinion—I want the opinion of a regular person, like you. A typical follower."

Bluefingers frowned. "All apologies, Vessel, but I'm *not* a follower of the Returned."

"But you work in the palace."

"And *you* live there, Vessel. Yet neither of us worship the Iridescent Tones. You are from Idris. I am from Pahn Kahl."

"Pahn Kahl is the same as Hallandren."

Bluefingers raised an eyebrow, pursing his lips. "Actually, Vessel, it's quite different."

"But you're ruled by the God King."

"We can accept him as king without worshipping him as our god," Bluefingers said. "That is one of the reasons why I'm a steward in the palace instead of a priest."

His robes, Siri thought. *Maybe that's why he always wears brown.* She turned, glancing down at the priests upon their pedestals in the sand. Each wore a different set of colors, each representing—she assumed—a different one of the Returned. "So what do you think of them?"

"Good people," Bluefingers said, "but misguided. A little like I think of you, Vessel."

She glanced at him. He, however, had already turned back to his ledgers. He wasn't the easiest man with whom to have a conversation. "But how do you explain the God King's radiance?"

"BioChroma," Bluefingers said, still scribbling, not sounding at all annoyed by her questions. He was obviously a man accustomed to dealing with interruption.

"The rest of the Returned don't bend white into colors like he does, do they?"

"No," Bluefingers said, "indeed they do not. They, however, don't hold the wealth of Breaths that he does."

"So he *is* different," Siri said. "Why was he born with more?"

"He wasn't, Vessel. The God King's power does not derive from the inherent BioChroma of being a Returned—in that, he is identical to the others. However, he holds something else. The Light of Peace, they call it. A fancy word for a treasure trove of Breath that numbers somewhere in the tens of thousands."

Tens of thousands? Siri thought. "That much?"

Bluefingers nodded distractedly. "The God Kings are said to be the only ones to ever achieve the Tenth Heightening. *That* is what makes light fracture around him, as well as gives him other abilities. The ability to break Lifeless Commands, for instance, or the ability to Awaken objects without touching them, using only the sound of his voice. These powers are less a function of divinity, and more a simple matter of holding so much Breath."

"But where did he get it?"

"The majority of it was originally gathered by Peacegiver the Blessed," Bluefingers said. "He collected thousands of Breaths during the days of the Manywar. He passed those on to the first Hallandren God King. That inheritance has been transferred from father to son for centuries—and has been enlarged, since each God King is given two Breaths a week, instead of the one that the other Returned receive."

"Oh," Siri said, sitting back, finding herself oddly disappointed by the news. Susebron was not a god, he was simply a man with far more BioChroma than normal.

But . . . what of the Returned themselves? Siri folded her arms again, still troubled. She'd never been forced to look objectively at what she believed. Austre was simply . . . well, God. You didn't question people when

they talked about God. The Returned were usurpers, who had cast the followers of Austre out of Hallandren, not true deities themselves.

Yet the they were so majestic. Why *had* the royal family been cast out of Hallandren? She knew the official story taught in Idris—that the royals hadn't supported the conflicts that led up to the Manywar. For that, the people had revolted against them. That revolt had been led by Kalad the Usurper.

Kalad. Though Siri had avoided most of her tutorial sessions, even she knew the stories of that man. He was the one who had led the people of Hallandren in the heresy of building Lifeless. He had created a powerful army of the creatures, one the likes of which had never been seen in the land. The stories said Kalad's Lifeless had been more dangerous, new and distinctive. Terrible and destructive. He'd eventually been defeated by Peacegiver, who had then ended the Manywar through diplomacy.

The stories said that Kalad's armies were still out there, somewhere. Waiting to sweep down and destroy again. She knew that story was just a legend told by hearthlight, but it still gave her shivers to consider.

Regardless, Peacegiver had seized control and stopped the Manywar. However, he had not restored Hallandren to its rightful rulers. Idris's histories claimed betrayal and treachery. The monks spoke of heresies that were too deeply ingrained in Hallandren.

Surely the Hallandren people had their own version of the story. Watching the Returned in their boxes made Siri wonder. One fact was obvious: Things in Hallandren were a whole lot less terrible than she had been taught.

VIVENNA SHIVERED, cringing as the people in their colorful outfits crowded around her.

Things here are worse, even, than my tutors said, she decided, wriggling in her seat. Parlin seemed to have lost much of his nervousness about being in such a crowd. He was focused on the debating priests on the floor of the arena.

She still couldn't decide if she thought the Breath she held was horrible or wonderful. Gradually, she was coming to appreciate that it was horrible *because* of how wonderful it felt. The more people that surged around her, the more overwhelmed she felt by her Breath-heightened perception of them.

Surely if Parlin only could sense the sheer scope of all those colors, he wouldn't gawk so dumbly at the costumes. Surely if he could *feel* the people, he would feel boxed in as she did, unable to breathe.

That's it, she thought. *I've seen Siri, and I know what they've done with her. It's time to go.* Turning, she stood. And froze.

A man was standing two rows back, and he was staring directly at Vivenna. She normally wouldn't have paid him any attention. He was wearing ragged brown clothing, ripped in places, his loose trousers tied at the waist by a simple rope. His facial hair was halfway between being a beard and just scruff. His hair was unkempt and came down to his shoulders.

And he created a bubble of color around him so bright that he had to be of the Fifth Heightening. He stared at her, meeting her eyes, and she had a sudden and awful panicked sense that he knew exactly who she was.

She stumbled back. The strange man didn't take his eyes off of her. He shifted, pushing back his cloak and exposing a large, black-hilted sword at his belt. Few people in Hallandren wore weapons. This man didn't seem to care. How had he gotten that thing into the court? The people to the sides gave him a wide berth, and Vivenna swore she could sense *something* about that sword. It seemed to darken colors. Deepen them. Make tans into browns, reds into maroons, blues into navies. As if it had its own BioChroma . . .

"Parlin," she said, more sharply than she'd intended. "We're leaving."

"But—"

"*Now,*" Vivenna said, turning and rushing away. Her newfound BioChromatic senses informed her that the man's eyes were still on her. Now that she realized it, she understood that his eyes on her were probably what had made her so uncomfortable in the first place.

The tutors spoke of this, she thought as she and Parlin made their way to one of the stone exit passages. *Life sense, the ability to tell when there are people nearby, and to tell when they're watching you. Everyone has it to a small degree. BioChroma enhances that.*

As soon as they entered the passage, the sense of being watched vanished, and Vivenna let out a relieved breath.

"I don't see why you wanted to leave," Parlin said.

"We've seen what we needed to," Vivenna said.

"I guess," Parlin said. "I thought you might want to listen to what the priests were saying about Idris."

Vivenna froze. "What?"

Parlin frowned, looking distraught. "I think they might be declaring war. Don't we have a treaty?"

Lord God of Colors! Vivenna thought, turning and scrambling back up into the open arena.

16

". . . still say that we cannot *possibly* justify military action against Idris!" a priest shouted. The man wore blue and gold. It was Stillmark's high priest—Lightsong couldn't quite remember the man's name. Nanrovah?

The argument was not unexpected. Lightsong leaned forward. Nanrovah and his master, Stillmark, were both staunch traditionalists. They tended to argue against pretty much every proposal, but were well respected. Stillmark was nearly as old as Blushweaver, and was considered wise. Lightsong rubbed his chin.

Opposing Nanrovah was Blushweaver's own high priestess, Inhanna. "Oh, come now," the woman said from the sands down below. "Do we really need to have *this* argument again? Idris is nothing more than a rebel enclave set up inside the borders of our own kingdom!"

"They keep to themselves," Nanrovah said. "Holding lands we don't want anyway."

"Lands we don't want?" Blushweaver's priestess said, sputtering. "They hold every single pass to the northern kingdoms! Every workable copper mine! They have military garrisons within striking distance of T'Telir! And they *still* claim to be ruled by the rightful kings of Hallandren!"

Nanrovah fell silent, and there was a surprisingly large rumble of assent from the watching priests. Lightsong eyed them. "You've seeded the group with people sympathetic to your cause?" he asked.

"Of course," Blushweaver said. "So did the others. I just did a better job."

The debate continued, other priests stepping up to argue for and against an assault on Idris. The priests spoke the concerns of the people of the nation; part of their duty was to listen to the people and study issues of national import, then discuss them here so that the gods—who didn't have the opportunity to go out among the people—could be kept informed. If an issue came to a head, the gods would make their judgments. They were divided into subgroups, each having responsibility for a certain area. Some gods were in charge of civic issues; others governed agreements and treaties.

Idris was not a new topic for the assembly. However, Lightsong had never seen the discussion become so explicit and extreme. Sanctions had been discussed. Blockades. Even some military pressure. But war? Nobody had said the word yet, but they all knew what the priests were discussing.

He could not dispel the images from his dreams—visions of death and pain. He did not accept them as prophetic, but he did acknowledge that they must have something to do with the worries inside his subconscious. He feared what war would do to them. Perhaps he was just a coward. It did seem that suppressing Idris would solve so much.

"You're behind this debate, aren't you," he said, turning to Blushweaver.

"Behind it?" Blushweaver said sweetly. "Dear Lightsong, the priests decide the issues to be discussed. Gods don't bother with such mundanity."

"I'm sure," Lightsong said, reclining. "You want my Lifeless Commands."

"I wouldn't say that," Blushweaver said, "I just want you to be informed should you . . ."

She trailed off as Lightsong gave her a flat look.

"Aw, Colors," she swore. "Of *course* I need your Commands, Lightsong. Why else would I go to all the trouble to get you up here? You're a very difficult person to manipulate, you know."

"Nonsense," he said. "You just have to promise me that I won't have to do a thing, and then I'll do anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Anything that doesn't require doing anything."

"That's nothing, then."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's something!"

Blushweaver rolled her eyes.

Lightsong was more troubled than he let on. The arguments for attack had never been so strong. There was proof of a military buildup in Idris and the highlanders had been particularly stingy with the northern passes lately. Beyond that, there was a growing belief that the Returned were weaker than they'd been in previous generations. Not less powerful in BioChroma, just less . . . divine. Less benevolent, less wise. Lightsong happened to agree.

It had been three years since a Returned had given up his or her life to heal someone. The people were growing impatient with their gods. "There's more, isn't there?" he said, glancing at Blushweaver, who was still lounging back, delicately eating cherries. "What aren't they saying?"

"Lightsong, dear," she said. "You were right. Bring you to government proceedings, and it absolutely corrupts you."

"I just don't like secrets," he said. "They make my brain itch, keep me awake at nights. Engaging in politics is like pulling off a bandage—best to get the pain over with quickly."

Blushweaver pursed her lips. "Forced simile, dear."

"Best I can do at the moment, I'm afraid. Nothing dulls the wit more quickly than politics. Now, you were saying . . ."

She snorted. "I've told you already. The focus of all this is that woman."

"The queen," he said, glancing at the God King's box.

"They sent the wrong one," Blushweaver said. "The younger instead of the elder."

"I know," Lightsong said. "Clever of them."

"Clever?" Blushweaver said. "It's downright brilliant. Do you know what a fortune we paid these last twenty years to spy upon, study, and learn about the eldest daughter? Those of us who thought to be careful even studied the second daughter, the one they've made a monk. But the youngest? Nobody gave her half a thought."

And so the Idrians send a random element into court, Lightsong thought. *One that upsets plans and conniving that our politicians have been working on for decades.*

It *was* brilliant.

"Nobody knows *anything* about her," Blushweaver said, frowning deeply.

She obviously did not like being taken by surprise. "My spies in Idris insist the girl is of little consequence—which makes me worry that she is even more dangerous than I'd feared."

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. "And you don't think, maybe, that you might be overreacting a tad?"

"Oh?" Blushweaver asked. "And tell me, what would *you* do if you wanted to inject an agent into the court? Would you, perhaps, set up a decoy that you could display, drawing attention away from the *real* agent, whom you could train secretly with a clandestine agenda?"

Lightsong rubbed his chin. *She has a point.* Maybe. Living among so many scheming people tended to make one see plots everywhere. However, the plot that Blushweaver suggested had a very serious chance of being dangerous. What better way to get an assassin close to the God King than to send someone to marry him?

No, that wouldn't be it. Killing the God King would just cause Hallandren to go on the rampage. But if they'd sent a woman skilled in the art of manipulation—a woman who could secretly poison the mind of the God King . . .

"We need to be ready to act," Blushweaver said. "I won't sit and let my kingdom be pulled out from under me—I won't idly be cast out as the royals once were. You control a fourth of our Lifeless. That's ten thousand soldiers who don't need to eat, who can march tirelessly. If we convince the other three with Commands to join us . . ."

Lightsong thought for a moment, then nodded and stood.

"What are you doing?" Blushweaver asked, sitting up.

"I think I'll go for a stroll," Lightsong said.

"Where?"

Lightsong glanced over at the queen.

"Oh, blessed Colors," Blushweaver said with a sigh. "Lightsong, do *not* ruin this. We walk a very delicate line, here."

"I'll do my best."

"I don't suppose I can talk you out of interacting with her?"

"My dear," Lightsong said, glancing backward. "I at least have to chat with her. Nothing would be more intolerable than being overthrown by a person with whom I'd never even had a nice conversation."

Bluefingers wandered off sometime during the court proceedings. Siri didn't notice—she was too busy watching the priests debate.

She had to be misunderstanding. Surely they couldn't be thinking about attacking Idris. What would be the point? What would Hallandren gain? As the priests finished their discussion on that topic, Siri turned to one of her serving women. "What was that about?"

The woman glanced down, not answering.

"They sounded like they were discussing war," Siri said. "They wouldn't really invade, would they?"

The woman shuffled uncomfortably, then glanced at one of her companions. That woman rushed away. A few moments later, the servant returned with Treledees. Siri frowned slightly. She did *not* like speaking with the man.

"Yes, Vessel?" the tall man said, eyeing her with his usual air of disdain.

She swallowed, refusing to be intimidated. "The priests," she said. "What were they just discussing?"

"Your homeland of Idris, Vessel."

"I know that much," Siri said. "What do they want with Idris?"

"It seemed to me, Vessel, that they were arguing about whether or not to attack the rebel province and bring it back under proper royal control."

"Rebel province?"

"Yes, Vessel. Your people are in a state of rebellion against the rest of the kingdom."

"But you rebelled against us!"

Treledees raised an eyebrow.

Different viewpoints on history indeed, Siri thought. "I can see how somebody might think as you do," she said. "But . . . you wouldn't really attack us, would you? We sent you a queen, just as you demanded. Because of that, the next God King will have royal blood."

Assuming the current God King ever decides to consummate our marriage. . . .

Treledees simply shrugged. "It is likely nothing, Vessel. The gods simply needed to be apprised of the current political climate of T'Telir."

His words didn't offer Siri much comfort. She shivered. Should she be doing something? Trying to politic in Idris's defense?

"Vessel," Treledees said.

She glanced at him. His peaked hat was so tall it brushed the top of the canopy. In a city full of colors and beauty, for some reason Treledees's long face seemed even bleaker for the contrast. "Yes?" she asked.

"There is a matter of some delicacy I fear that I must discuss with you."

"What is that?"

"You are familiar with monarchies," he said. "Indeed, you are the daughter of a king. I assume that you know how important it is to a government that there be a secure, stable plan for succession."

"I guess."

"Therefore," Treledees said, "you realize that it is of no small importance that an heir be provided as *quickly* as possible."

Siri blushed. "We're working on that."

"With all due respect, Vessel," Treledees said. "There is some degree of disagreement upon whether or not you actually are."

Siri blushed further, hair reddening as she glanced away from those callous eyes.

"Such arguments, of course, are limited to those inside the palace," Treledees said. "You can trust in the discretion of our staff and priests."

"How do you know?" Siri said, looking up. "I mean, about us. Maybe we *are* . . . working on it. Maybe you'll have your heir before you know it."

Treledees blinked once, slowly, regarding her as if she were a ledger to be added up and accounted. "Vessel," he said. "Do you honestly think that we would take an unfamiliar, foreign woman and place her in close proximity to our most holy of gods without keeping watch?"

Siri felt her breath catch, and she had a moment of horror. *Of course!* she thought. *Of course they were watching. To make sure I didn't hurt the God King, to make certain things went according to plan.*

Being naked before her husband was bad enough. To be so exposed before men like Treledees—men who saw her not as a woman, but as an annoyance—felt even worse, somehow. She found herself slouching, arms wrapping around her chest and its revealing neckline.

"Now," Treledees said, leaning in. "We understand that the God King may not be what you expected. He may even be . . . difficult to work with.

You are a woman, however, and should know how to use your charms to motivate."

"How can I 'motivate' if I can't talk to him or look at him?" she snapped.

"I'm sure you'll find a way," Treledees said. "You only have one task in this palace. You want to make certain Idris is protected? Well, give the God King's priesthood what we desire, and your rebels will earn our appreciation. My colleagues and I have no small influence in the court, and we can do much to safeguard your homeland. All we ask is that you perform this single duty. Give us an heir. Give the kingdom stability. Not everything in Hallandren is as . . . cohesive as it may appear to you at first."

Siri remained slouched down, not looking at Treledees.

"I see that you understand," he said. "I feel that . . ." He trailed off, turning to the side. A procession was approaching Siri's box. Its members wore gold and red, and a tall figure at the front caused them to shine with vibrant color.

Treledees frowned, then glanced at her. "We will speak further, if it becomes necessary. Do your duty, Vessel. Or there will be consequences."

With that, the priest withdrew.

She didn't *look* dangerous. That, more than anything else, made Lightsong inclined to believe Blushweaver's concerns. *I've been in the court for far too long,* he thought to himself as he smiled pleasantly at the queen. *All my life, actually.*

She was a small thing, much younger than he had expected. Barely a woman. She looked intimidated as he nodded to her, waiting while his priests arranged furniture for him. Then he sat, accepting some grapes from the queen's serving women, even though he wasn't hungry.

"Your Majesty," he said. "It is a pleasure to meet you, I'm sure."

The girl hesitated. "You're sure?"

"Figure of speech, my dear," Lightsong said. "A rather redundant one—which is quite appropriate, since *I* am a rather redundant person."

The girl cocked her head. *Colors,* Lightsong thought, remembering that she'd just finished with her period of isolation. *I'm probably the only Returned*

that she's met besides the God King. What a bad first impression. Still, there was nothing to be done about it. Lightsong was who he was. Whoever that was.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Grace," the queen said slowly. She turned as a serving woman whispered his name to her. "Lightsong the Brave, Lord of Heroes," she said, smiling at him.

There was a hesitancy about her. Either she had not been trained for formal situations—which Lightsong found difficult to believe, since she'd been raised in a palace—or she was a quite a good actress. He frowned inwardly.

The woman's arrival should have put an end to the discussions of war, but instead she had only exacerbated them. He kept his eyes open, for he feared the images of destruction he would see flashing inside his mind's eye if he so much as blinked. They waited like Kalad's Phantoms, hovering just beyond his vision.

He couldn't accept those dreams as foretellings. If he did, it meant that he *was* a god. And if that were the case, then he feared greatly for them all.

On the outside, he simply gave the queen his third most charming smile and popped a grape into his mouth. "No need to be so formal, Your Majesty. You will soon realize that among Returned, I am by far the least. If cows could Return, they'd undoubtedly be ranked higher than I."

She wavered again, obviously uncertain how to deal with him. It was a common reaction. "Might I inquire as to the nature of your visitation?" she asked.

Too formal. Not at ease. Uncomfortable around those of high rank. Could it be possible that she *was* genuine? No. It was likely an act to put him at ease. To make him underestimate her. Or was he just thinking too much?

Colors take you, Blushweaver! he thought. *I really don't want to be part of this.*

He almost withdrew. But, then, that wouldn't be very pleasant of him—and contrary to some of the things he said, Lightsong *did* like being pleasant. *Best to be kind,* he thought, smiling idly to himself. *That way, if she ever does take over the kingdom, perhaps she'll behead me last.* "You ask after the nature of my visitation?" he said. "I believe it has no nature, Your Majesty, other than to appear natural—at which I have already failed by staring at you for far too long while thinking to myself about your place in this mess."

The queen frowned again.

Lightsong popped a grape in his mouth. "Wonderful things," he said,

holding up another one. "Delightfully sweet, wrapped in their own little package. Deceptive, really. So hard and dry on the outside, but so delectable on the inside. Don't you think?"

"We . . . don't have many grapes in Idris, Your Grace."

"I'm rather the opposite, you know," he said. "Fluffy and pretty on the outside, without much of import on the inside. But I guess that is beside the point. You, my dear, are a very welcome sight. Much more so than a grape."

"I . . . How is that, Your Grace?"

"We haven't had a queen in such a long time," Lightsong said. "Since before my Return, in fact. And old Susebron up there really *has* been moping about the palace lately. Looking forlorn. It's good he has a woman in his life."

"Thank you for the compliment, Your Grace," the queen said.

"You're welcome. I'll make up a few more, if you like."

She fell silent.

Well, then, that's it, he thought, sighing. *Blushweaver was right. I probably shouldn't have come.*

"All right," the queen said, hair suddenly turning red as she threw her hands up in the air. "*What* is going on here?"

He hesitated. "Your Majesty?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Probably."

"But you're supposed to be a god!" she said, leaning back, staring up at the canopy. "Just when I thought things in this city were starting to make sense, the priests start yelling at me, then you come along! What am I supposed to do with you? You seem more like a schoolboy than a god!"

Lightsong paused, then settled back into his seat, smiling. "You have me found out," he said, opening his hands. "I killed the real god and took his place. I've come to hold you ransom for your sweets."

"There," the queen said, pointing. "Aren't you supposed to be . . . I don't know, distinguished or something?"

He spread his hands out. "My dear, this *is* what passes for being distinguished in Hallandren."

She didn't seem convinced.

"I am, of course, lying through my teeth," he said, eating another grape. "You shouldn't base your opinion of the others upon what you think of me. They're all much more deific than I am."

The queen sat back. "I thought you were the god of bravery."

"Technically."

"You seem more like the god of jesters to me."

"I've applied for the position and been turned down," he said. "You should see the person they have doing the job. Dull as a rock and twice as ugly."

Siri paused.

"I wasn't lying that time," Lightsong said. "Mirthgiver, god of laughter. If ever there was a god more poorly suited to his position than I, it's he."

"I don't understand you," she said. "It appears there's a *lot* I don't understand in this city."

This woman is no fake, Lightsong thought, staring into her youthful, confused eyes. *Or, if she is, then she's best actress I've ever met.*

That meant something. Something important. It was possible there were mundane reasons this girl had been sent instead of her sister. Sickness on the part of the elder daughter, perhaps. But Lightsong didn't buy that. She was part of something. A plot, or perhaps several. And whatever those plots were, *she* didn't know about them.

Kalad's Phantoms! Lightsong cursed mentally. *This child is going to get ripped apart and fed to the wolves!*

But what could he really do about it? He sighed, standing, causing his priests to begin packing his things. The girl watched with confusion as he nodded to her, giving her a wan smile of farewell. She stood and curtsied slightly, though she probably didn't need to. She was his queen, even if she wasn't herself Returned.

Lightsong turned to go, then stopped, recalling his own first few months in the court, and the confusion he'd known. He reached over, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Don't let them get to you, child," he whispered.

And with that, he withdrew.

17

Vivenna walked back toward Lemex's house, dissecting the argument she'd heard at the Court of Gods. Her tutors had instructed her that discussions in the Court Assembly didn't always lead to action; just because they talked of war didn't mean it would happen.

This discussion, however, seemed to mean more. It was too passionate, with too many voices for one side. It indicated that her father was right, and that war was inevitable.

She walked with her head down on a nearly deserted street. She was beginning to learn that she could avoid the roiling masses by walking through more residential sections of the city. It appeared that people in T'Telir liked to be where everybody else was.

The street was in a wealthy neighborhood, had a slate stone sidewalk running along the side of it. It made for pleasant walking. Parlin walked beside her, occasionally pausing to study ferns or palm trees. The Hallandren liked plants; most of the homes were shaded by trees, vines, and exotic blooming shrubs. In Idris, each of the large homes along the street would have been considered a mansion, but here they were only of average size—probably the homes of merchants.

I need to stay focused, she thought. *Is Hallandren going to attack soon? Or is this just a prelude to something still months, perhaps years, away?*

Real action wouldn't occur until the gods voted, and Vivenna wasn't sure what it would take to get them to that point. She shook her head. Only

one day in T'Telir, and already she knew that her training and tutorials hadn't prepared her half as well as she'd assumed.

She felt as if she knew nothing. And that left her feeling very lost. She was not the confident, competent woman she'd assumed herself to be. The frightening truth was, should she have been sent to become the God King's bride, she would have been nearly as ineffective and confused as poor Siri undoubtedly was.

They turned a corner, Vivenna trusting in Parlin's amazing sense of direction to get them back to Lemex's house, and they passed under the gaze of one of the silent D'Denir statues. The proud warrior stood with sword raised above his stone head, his armor—carved into the statue—augmented by a red scarf tied and flapping around his neck. He looked dramatic, as if he were going gloriously to war. It wasn't long before they approached the steps to Lemex's house. Vivenna froze, however, when she saw that the door was hanging from one hinge. The lower part was cracked, as if it had been kicked very hard.

Parlin pulled up beside her, then hissed, holding up a hand for her to be silent. His hand went to the long hunting knife at his belt and he glanced around. Vivenna stepped back, nerves itching to flee. And yet, where would she go? The mercenaries were her only connection in the city. Denth and Tonk Fah could have handled an attack, right?

Someone approached from the other side of the door. Her BioChromatic senses warned her of the proximity. She laid a hand on Parlin's arm, preparing to bolt.

Denth pushed the broken door open, sticking his head out. "Oh," he said. "It's you."

"What happened?" she asked. "Were you attacked?"

Denth glanced at the door and chuckled to himself. "Nah," he said, pushing the door open and waving her in. Through the broken door she could see that furniture had been ripped apart, there were holes in the walls, and pictures were slashed and broken. Denth wandered back inside, kicking aside some stuffing from a cushion, making his way toward the stairs. Several of the steps had been broken.

He glanced back, noting her confusion. "Well, we *did* say we were going to search the house, Princess. Figured we might as well do a good job of it."

Vivenna sat down very carefully, half-expecting the chair to collapse beneath her. Tonk Fah and Denth had been *very* thorough in their search—they had broken every bit of wood in the house, it seemed, including chair legs. Fortunately, her current chair had been propped up reasonably well, and it held her weight.

The desk in front of her—Lemex's desk—was splintered. The drawers had been removed, and a false back had been revealed, the compartment emptied. A group of papers and several bags sat on the desktop.

"That's everything," Denth said, leaning against the room's doorframe. Tonk Fah lounged on a broken couch, its stuffing sticking out awkwardly.

"Did you have to break so much?" Vivenna asked.

"Had to be certain," Denth said, shrugging. "You'd be surprised where people hide things."

"Inside the front door?" Vivenna asked flatly.

"Would *you* have thought to look there?"

"Of course not."

"Sounds like a pretty good hiding place to me, then. We knocked, and thought we found a hollow space. Just turned out to be a section of different wood, but it was important to check."

"People get really clever when it comes to hiding important stuff," Tonk Fah said with a yawn.

"You know the thing I hate most about being a mercenary?" Denth asked, holding up a hand.

Vivenna raised an eyebrow.

"Splinters," he said, wiggling several red fingers.

"No hazard pay for those," Tonk Fah added.

"Oh, now you're just being silly," Vivenna said, sorting through the items on the table. One of the bags clinked suggestively. Vivenna undid the drawstring and pulled open the top.

Gold glistened inside. A lot of it.

"Little over five thousand marks in there," Denth said lazily. "Lemex had it stashed all over the house. Found one bar of it in the leg of your chair."

"Got easier when we discovered the paper he'd used to remind himself of where he hid it all," Tonk Fah noted.

"*Five thousand marks?*" Vivenna said, feeling her hair lighten slightly in shock.

"Seems like old Lemex was storing up quite the little nest egg," Denth said, chuckling. "That, mixed with the amount of Breath he held . . . he must have extorted even more from Idris than I assumed."

Vivenna stared at the bag. Then, she looked up at Denth. "You . . . gave it to me," she said. "You could have taken it and spent it!"

"Actually, we did," Denth said. "Took about ten bits for lunch. Should be here any minute."

Vivenna met his eyes.

"Now there's what I'm talking about, eh, Tonks?" Denth said, glancing down at the larger man. "If I'd been, say, a butler, would she be looking at me like that? Just because I didn't take the money and run? Why does everyone expect a mercenary to rob them?"

Tonk Fah grunted, stretching again.

"Look through those papers, Princess," Denth said, kicking Tonk Fah's couch, then nodding toward the door. "We'll wait for you downstairs."

Vivenna watched them retreat, Tonk Fah grumbling as he had to rise, bits of stuffing sticking to the back of his clothing. They thumped their way down the stairs, and soon she heard dishes rattling. They'd likely sent one of the street boys—who passed periodically yelling that they would bring food from a local restaurant—for the meal.

Vivenna didn't move. She was increasingly uncertain of her purpose in the city. Yet she still had Denth and Tonk Fah, and—surprisingly—she was finding herself growing attached to them. How many soldiers in her father's army—good men, all of them—would have been able to resist running off with five thousand marks? There was more to these mercenaries than they let on.

She turned her attention to the books, letters, and papers on the desk.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Vivenna still sat alone, a solitary candle burning and dripping wax onto the splintered desk corner. She had long since

stopped reading. A plate of food sat uneaten by the door, brought by Parlin some time before.

Letters lay spread out on the desk before her. It had taken time to put them in order. Most were penned in her father's familiar hand. Not the hand of her father's scribe. Her father's *own* hand. That had been her first clue. He only wrote his most personal, or most secret, communications on his own.

Vivenna kept her hair under control. She deliberately breathed in and out. She didn't look out the darkened window at the lights of a city that should have been asleep. She simply sat.

Numb.

The final letter—the last before Lemex's death—sat on top of the pile. It was only a few weeks old.

My friend, her father's script read.

Our conversations have worried me more than I care to admit. I have spoken with Yarda at length. We can see no solution.

War is coming. We all know that now. The continued—and increasingly vigorous—arguments in the Court of Gods show a disturbing trend. The money we sent to buy you enough Breath to attend those meetings is some of the best I have ever spent.

All signs point to the inevitability of Hallandren Lifeless marching to our mountains. Therefore, I give you leave to do as we have discussed. Any disruptions you can cause in the city—any delays you can earn us—will be extremely valuable. The additional funds you requested should have arrived by now.

My friend, I must admit a weakness in myself. I will never be able to send Vivenna to be a hostage in that dragon's nest of a city. To send her would be to kill her, and I cannot do that. Even though I know it would be best for Idris if I did.

I'm not yet sure what I will do. I will not send her, for I love her too much. However, breaking the treaty would bring the Hallandren wrath against my people even more quickly. I fear I may have to make a very difficult decision in the days to come.

But that is the essence of a king's duty.

Until we correspond again,

Dedelin, your liege and your friend.

Vivenna looked away from the letter. The room was too perfectly silent. She wanted to scream at the letter and her father, who was now so far away.

And yet, she could not. She had been trained for better. Tantrums were useless displays of arrogance.

Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't set yourself above others. He who makes himself high will be cast down low. But what of the man who murders one of his daughters to save the other? What of the man who claims—to your face—that the switch was for other reasons? That it was for the good of Idris? That it wasn't about favoritism at all?

What of the king who betrayed the highest tenets of his religion by purchasing Breath for one of his spies?

Vivenna blinked at a tear in her eye, then gritted her teeth, angry at herself and the world. Her father was supposed to be a good man. The perfect king. Wise and knowing, always sure of himself and always right.

The man she saw in these letters was far more human. Why should she be so shocked to learn that?

It doesn't matter, she told herself. *None of that matters.* Factions in the Hallandren government were rallying the nation for war. Reading her father's candid words, she finally believed him completely. Hallandren troops would likely march on her homeland before the year was out. And then, the Hallandren—so colorful yet so deceptive—would hold Siri hostage and threaten to kill her unless Dedelin surrendered.

Her father would not give up his kingdom. Siri would be executed.

And that *is what I'm here to stop,* Vivenna thought. Her hands grew tighter, gripping the edges of the desktop, jaw set. She brushed away the traitorous tear. She had been trained to be strong even when surrounded by an unfamiliar city and its people. She had work to do.

She rose, leaving the letters on the table with the bag of coins and Lemex's journal. She made her way down the stairs, avoiding the broken steps, to where the mercenaries were teaching Parlin how to play a game with wooden cards. The three men looked up as Vivenna approached. She settled herself carefully on the floor, sitting with her legs beneath her in an unassuming posture.

She met their eyes as she spoke. "I know where some of Lemex's money came from," she said. "Idris and Hallandren will soon go to war. Because of this threat, my father gave much greater resources to Lemex than I'd realized. He sent enough money for Lemex to buy fifty Breaths, allowing him to enter the court and report on its proceedings. Obviously, my father didn't know that Lemex already *had* a sizable amount of Breath."

The three men were silent. Tonk Fah shot a glance at Denth, who sat back, resting against an overturned, broken chair.

"I believe that Lemex was still loyal to Idris," she said. "His personal writings make that relatively clear. He was not a traitor; he was simply greedy. He wanted as much Breath as possible because he had heard that it extended a person's life. Lemex and my father had planned to hinder the war preparations from inside Hallandren. Lemex promised he would find a way to sabotage the Lifeless armies, damage the city's supplies, and generally undermine their ability to wage war. For him to accomplish this, my father sent him a large sum of money."

"About five thousand marks' worth?" Denth asked, rubbing his chin.

"Less than that," Vivenna said. "But a large chunk nonetheless. I believe that you are right about Lemex, Denth—he has been stealing from the Crown for some time."

She fell silent. Parlin looked confused. That wasn't uncommon. The mercenaries, however, didn't look surprised.

"I don't know if Lemex intended to do as my father asked," Vivenna said, keeping her voice even. "The way he hid the money, some of the things he wrote . . . well, maybe he was finally planning to turn traitor and run. We can't know what he would eventually have decided. We do, however, have a vague list of things he planned to accomplish. Those plans were convincing enough to persuade my father, and the urgency of his letters has convinced me. We are going to continue Lemex's work and undermine Hallandren's ability to wage war."

The room fell silent. "And . . . your sister?" Parlin finally asked.

"We will get her out," Vivenna said firmly. "Her rescue and safety is our first priority."

"That is all easier discussed than accomplished, Princess," Denth said.

"I know."

The mercenaries shared a look. "Well," Denth finally said, standing up. "Better get back to work, then." He nodded at Tonk Fah, who sighed and grumbled, standing.

"Wait," Vivenna said, frowning. "What?"

"I figured once you saw those papers that you'd want to continue," Denth said, stretching. "Now that I've seen what he was up to, I can piece together why he had us do some of the things we were involved in. One of

those was to contact and support some rebellious factions here in the city, including one that was stamped out just a few weeks back. Cult of disaffection centered on a guy named Vahr."

"Always wondered why Lemex gave him support," Tonk Fah said.

"That faction's dead," Denth said, "along with Vahr himself. But a lot of his followers are still around. Waiting for trouble to come their way. We can contact them. There are a few other leads I think we can look into, things Lemex didn't explain completely, but which I might be able to figure out."

"And . . . you can handle something like this?" Vivenna asked. "You just said it wouldn't be easy."

Denth shrugged. "Won't be. But if you haven't realized it yet, this kind of thing is why Lemex hired us. A team of three high-priced, specialist mercenaries isn't exactly the type of thing you keep around to serve your tea."

"Unless you want the tea rammed up someplace uncomfortable," Tonk Fah noted.

Three mercenaries? Vivenna thought. *That's right. There's another one. A woman.* "Where's the other member of your team?"

"Jewels?" Denth asked. "You'll meet her soon enough."

"Unfortunately," Tonk Fah said under his breath.

Denth elbowed his friend. "For now, let us go back out and see how things stand on our projects. Gather what you want from this house. We'll move out tomorrow."

"Move out?" Vivenna said.

"Unless you want to sleep on a mattress Tonk Fah ripped into five pieces," Denth noted. "He has a thing about mattresses."

"And chairs," Tonk Fah said cheerfully, "and tables, and doors, and walls, actually. Oh, and people."

"Either way, Princess," Denth said, "this building was well known to people who worked with Lemex. As you've discovered, he wasn't exactly the most honest fellow around. I doubt you want the baggage that comes with being associated with him."

"Best to move to another house," Tonk Fah agreed.

"We'll try not to break up the next one quite so badly," Denth said.

"No promises though," Tonk Fah said with a wink.

And then the two left.

18

Siri stood before the door to her husband's bedchamber, shuffling nervously. As usual, Bluefingers stood beside her, and he was the only other one in the hallway. He scribbled on his pad, giving no indication of how he always knew when it was time for her to enter.

For once, she didn't mind the delay, nervous though she was. It gave her more time to think about what she was going to do. The day's events still buzzed about in her head: Treledees, telling her that she needed to provide an heir. Lightsong the Bold, talking in circles, then leaving her with what had seemed like a heartfelt farewell. Her king and husband, sitting on his tower above, bending light around him. The priests below, arguing about whether or not to invade her homeland.

A lot of people wanted to push her in different directions, yet none of them were really willing to tell her how to do what they wanted—and some didn't even bother to tell her *what* they wanted. The only thing they were accomplishing was annoying her. She was not a seductress. She had no idea how to make the God King desire her—particularly since she was terrified of him doing just that.

High Priest Treledees had given her a command. Therefore, she intended to show him how she responded to commands, particularly when they had threats attached to them. Tonight, she would go into the king's bedchamber, sit down on the floor, and refuse to strip. She'd confront the God King. He didn't want her. Well, she was tired of being ogled every night.

She intended to explain all this to him in no uncertain terms. If he wanted to see her naked again, he'd have to order servants to strip her. She doubted that he'd do that. He'd made no move toward her, and when he presided over the arena debates, he'd actually done no more than sit and watch. She was getting a new impression of this God King. He was a man with so much power, he had grown lazy. He was a man who had everything, and so he bothered with nothing. He was a man who expected others to do everything for him. People like him annoyed her. She was reminded of a guard captain in Idris who had insisted on making his men work hard, while he spent his afternoons playing cards.

It was time the God King was defied. More than that, it was time that his priests learned that they couldn't bully her. She was tired of being used. Tonight, she would react. That was her decision. And it made her nervous as all Colors.

She glanced at Bluefingers. Eventually, she caught his eye. "Do they really watch me each night?" she asked, leaning in and whispering.

He paused, paling slightly. He glanced to either side, then shook his head.

She frowned. *But Treledees knew that I hadn't been bedded by the God King.*

Bluefingers raised a finger, pointing to his eyes, then shook his head. Then he pointed to his ears and nodded. He pointed to a doorway down the hall.

They listen, Siri thought.

Bluefingers leaned in closer. "They would never watch, Vessel," he whispered. "Remember, the God King is their holiest of deities. Seeing him nude, watching him with his wife . . . no, they wouldn't dare. However, they aren't above *listening.*"

She nodded. "They are very concerned about an heir."

Bluefingers glanced about nervously.

"Am I really in danger from them?" she asked.

He met her eyes, then nodded sharply. "More danger than you know, Vessel." Then he backed away, gesturing at the doorway.

You have to help me! she mouthed at him.

He shook his head, holding up his hands. *I cannot. Not now.* With that, he pushed open the door, bowed, and scuttled away, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

Siri glared at him. The time was swiftly approaching when she'd need to corner him and find out what he really knew. Until then, she had other

people to annoy. She turned and glanced into the dark room. Her nervousness returned.

Is this wise? Being belligerent had never bothered her before. And yet . . . her life wasn't like it had been before. Bluefingers's fear had left her even more on edge.

Defiance. It had always been her way to get attention. She hadn't been obstinate out of spite. She'd simply been unable to measure up to Vivenna, so she'd just done the opposite of what was expected of her. Her defiance had worked in the past. Or had it? Her father had been perpetually angry at her, and Vivenna had always treated her like a child. The city's people had loved her, but sufferingly.

No, Siri thought suddenly. *No, I can't go back to that. The people in this palace—this court—they aren't the types you can defy just because you're annoyed.* Spurn the palace priests, and they wouldn't grumble at her like her father had. They'd show her what it really meant to be in their power.

But what to do then? She couldn't keep throwing off her clothing and kneeling on the floor, naked, could she?

Feeling confused, and a little angry at herself, she stepped into the dark room and pulled the door closed. The God King waited in his corner, shadowed as always. Siri looked at him, staring at that too-calm face. She knew that she should disrobe and kneel, but she didn't.

Not because she felt defiant. Not even because she felt angry or petulant. Because she was tired of wondering. Who was this man who could rule gods and bend light with the force of his BioChroma? Was he really just spoiled and indolent?

He stared back at her. As before, he didn't grow angry at her insolence. Watching him, Siri pulled at the strings on her dress, dropping the bulky garment to the floor. She reached for the shoulders of her shift, but hesitated.

No, she thought. *This isn't right either.*

She glanced down at the shift; the edges of the white garment fuzzed, the white bending into color. She looked up at the God King's impassive face.

Then—gritting her teeth against her nervousness—Siri took a step forward.

He tensed. She could see it in the edges of his eyes and around his lips. She took another step forward, the white of her garment bending further

into prismatic colors. The God King didn't do anything. He just watched as she drew closer and closer.

She stopped right in front of him. Then she turned from him and climbed up onto the bed, feeling the deep softness beneath her as she crawled to the middle of its mattress. She sat up on her knees, regarding the black marble wall with its obsidian sheen. The God King's priests waited just beyond, listening carefully to hear things that were really none of their business.

This, she thought, taking a deep breath, *is going to be exceptionally embarrassing.* But she'd been forced to lie prostrate, naked, before the God King for over a week. Was now really the time to start feeling self-conscious?

She began to bounce up and down on the bed, making its springs creak. Then, cringing slightly, she started to moan.

She hoped it was convincing. She didn't really know what it was supposed to sound like. And how long did it usually continue? She tried to make her moans get louder and louder, her bouncing more furious, for what she assumed was a proper amount of time. Then she stopped sharply, let out a final moan, and fell back onto the bed.

All was still. She glanced up, eyeing the God King. Some of his emotional mask had softened, and he displayed a very human look of confusion. She almost laughed out loud at how perplexed he seemed. She just met his eyes and shook her head. Then—her heart beating, her skin a bit sweaty—she lay back on the bed to rest.

Tired from the day's events and intrigues, it wasn't long after that she found herself rolled up in the luxurious comforter and relaxing. The God King left her alone. In fact, he'd grown tense at her approach, almost as if he were worried. Even frightened of her.

That couldn't be. He was the God and King of Hallandren, and she was just a silly girl, swimming in waters that were far over her head. No, he wasn't frightened. The concept was enough to again make her feel like laughing. She restrained herself, maintaining the illusion for the listening priests as she drifted off in the luxurious comfort of the bed.

THE NEXT MORNING, Lightsong did not get out of bed.

His servants stood around the perimeter of his room like a flock of birds

waiting for seed. As noon approached, they began to shuffle uncomfortably, shooting glances at one another.

He remained in bed, staring up at the ornate red canopy. Some servants approached tentatively, placing a tray of food atop a small table beside him. Lightsong did not reach for it.

He had dreamed of war again.

Finally, a figure walked up to the bed. Large of girth and draped in his priestly robes, Llarimar looked down at his god, betraying none of the annoyance that Lightsong was sure that he felt. "Leave us, please," Llarimar said to the servants.

They hesitated, uncertain. When was a god without his servants?

"Please," Llarimar repeated, though somehow his tone indicated that it was not a request. Slowly, the servants filed from the room. Llarimar moved the tray of food, then sat down on the edge of the low table. He studied Lightsong, expression thoughtful.

What did I ever do to earn a priest like him? Lightsong thought. He knew many of the high priests of other Returned, and most of them were various levels of insufferable. Some were quick to anger, others quick to point out fault, and still others were so fulsomely effusive toward their gods that it was downright maddening. Treledees, the God King's own high priest, was so stuck-up that he made even *gods* feel inferior.

And then there was Llarimar. Patient, understanding. He deserved a better god.

"All right, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "What is it this time?"

"I'm sick," Lightsong said.

"You can't get sick, Your Grace."

Lightsong gave a few weak coughs, to which Llarimar just rolled his eyes.

"Oh come on, Scoot," Lightsong said. "Can't you just play along a little?"

"Play along that you are sick?" Llarimar asked, showing a hint of amusement. "Your Grace, to do that would be to pretend that you're not a god. I do not believe that's a good precedent for your high priest to set."

"It's the truth," Lightsong whispered. "I'm no god."

Again, there was no sign of annoyance or anger from Llarimar. He just leaned down. "Please don't say such things, Your Grace. Even if you yourself do not believe, you should not say so."

"Why not?"

"For the sake of the many who *do* believe."

"And I should continue to deceive them?"

Llarimar shook his head. "It is no deception. It's not so uncommon for others to have more faith in someone than he has in himself."

"And that doesn't strike you as a little odd in my case?"

Llarimar smiled. "Not knowing your temperament, it doesn't. Now, what brought this on?"

Lightsong turned, looking up at the ceiling again. "Blushweaver wants my Commands for the Lifeless."

"Yes."

"She'll destroy that new queen of ours," Lightsong said. "Blushweaver worries that the Idrian royals are making a play for the Hallandren throne."

"Do you disagree?"

Lightsong shook his head. "No. They probably are. But the thing is, I don't think the girl—the queen—knows that she's part of anything. I'm worried that Blushweaver will crush the child out of fear. I'm worried that she'll be too aggressive and get us all into a war, when I don't know yet if that's the right thing to do."

"It seems that you already have a good handle on all this, Your Grace," Llarimar said.

"I don't want to be part of it, Scoot," Lightsong said. "I feel myself getting sucked in."

"It is your duty to be involved so that you can lead your kingdom. You can't avoid politics."

"I can if I don't get out of bed."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. "You don't honestly believe that, do you, Your Grace?"

Lightsong sighed. "You're not going to give me a lecture about how even my inaction has political effects, are you?"

Llarimar hesitated. "Perhaps. Like it or not, you are a part of the workings of this kingdom—and you produce effects even if you stay in bed. If you do nothing, then the problems are as much your fault as if you had instigated them."

"No," Lightsong said. "No, I think you're wrong. If I don't do anything, then at least I can't ruin things. Sure, I can *let* them go wrong, but that's not the same thing. It really isn't, no matter what people say."

"And if, by acting, you could make things better?"

Lightsong shook his head. "Not going to happen. You know me better than that."

"I do, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "I know you better, perhaps, than you think I do. You've always been one of the best men I have known."

Lightsong rolled his eyes, but then stopped, noting the expression on Llarimar's face.

Best men I have known . . .

Lightsong sat up. "You knew me!" he accused. "*That's* why you chose to be my priest. You did know me before! Before I died!"

Llarimar said nothing.

"Who was I?" Lightsong asked. "A good man, you claim. What was it about me that made me a good man?"

"I can say nothing, Your Grace."

"You've already said something," Lightsong said, raising a finger. "You might as well go on. No turning back."

"I've said too much already."

"Come on," Lightsong said. "Just a little bit. Was I from T'Telir, then? How did I die?" *Who is she, the woman I see in my dreams?*

Llarimar said nothing further.

"I could command you to speak . . ."

"No you couldn't," Llarimar said, smiling as he stood up. "It's like the rain, Your Grace. You can *say* you want to command the weather to change, but you don't believe it, deep down. It doesn't obey, and neither would I."

Convenient bit of theology, that, Lightsong thought. *Particularly when you want to hide things from your gods.*

Llarimar turned to go. "You have paintings waiting to be judged, Your Grace. I suggest that you let your servants bathe and dress you so that you can get through the day's work."

Lightsong sighed, stretching. *How exactly did he just do that to me?* he thought. Llarimar hadn't even really revealed anything, yet Lightsong had overcome his bout of melancholy. He eyed Llarimar as the priest reached the door and waved for the servants to return. Perhaps dealing with sullen deities was part of his job description.

But . . . he knew me before, Lightsong thought. *And now he's my priest. How did that happen?* "Scoot," Lightsong said, drawing the priest's attention.

Llarimar turned, guarded, obviously expecting Lightsong to pry further into his past.

"What should I do?" Lightsong asked. "About Blushweaver and the queen?"

"I cannot tell you, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "You see, it is from what *you* do that we learn. If I guide you, then we gain nothing."

"Except perhaps the life of a young girl who is being used as a pawn."

Llarimar paused. "Do your best, Your Grace," he said. "That is all I can suggest."

Great, Lightsong thought as he stood. He didn't know what his "best" was.

The truth was, he'd never bothered to find out.

19

"This is nice," Denth said, looking over the house. "Strong wood paneling. Will break very cleanly."

"Yeah," Tonk Fah added, peeking into a closet. "And it has plenty of storage. Bet we could fit a good half-dozen bodies in here alone."

Vivenna shot the two mercenaries a look, causing them to chuckle to themselves. The house wasn't as nice as Lemex's had been; she didn't want to be ostentatious. It was one of many that were built in a row along a well-maintained street. Deeper than it was wide, the building was bordered on either side with large palm trees, obscuring the view should someone try to spy from the neighboring buildings.

She was pleased. Part of her balked at living in a home that was—despite being modest by Hallandren standards—nearly as large as the king's palace back in Idris. However, she and Parlin had looked at and rejected cheaper sections of town. She didn't want to live in a place where she was afraid to go out at night, particularly since she worried that her Breath might make her a target.

She trailed down the stairs, the mercenaries following. The house had three stories—a small upper story with sleeping chambers, the main floor with a kitchen and sitting room, and a cellar for storage. The building was sparsely furnished, and Parlin had gone to the market to shop for more. She hadn't wanted to spend the money, but Denth had pointed out that they must at least *try* to keep up appearances, lest they end up drawing even more attention.

"Old Lemex's house will be taken care of soon," Denth said. "We left some hints in the underground, mentioning that the old man was dead. Whatever we didn't ransack, a gang of burglars will take care of tonight. By tomorrow, the city guard will be there, and they'll assume that the place was burgled. The nurse has been paid off, and she never knew who Lemex really was anyway. When nobody comes to pay for the funeral services, the authorities will take the house in forfeit and have the body burned with other debtors."

Vivenna stopped at the bottom of the stairs, paling. "That doesn't sound very respectful."

Denth shrugged. "What do you want to do? Go claim him at the charnel house yourself? Give him an Idrian ceremony?"

"Good way to get people asking questions, that," Tonk Fah said.

"Better to just let others deal with it," Denth said.

"I suppose," Vivenna said, turning away from the stairs and walking into the sitting room. "It just bothers me, letting his body be cared for by . . ."

"By what?" Denth said, amused. "Pagans?"

Vivenna didn't look at him.

"The old man didn't seem to care much about heathen ways," Tonk Fah noted. "Not with the number of Breaths he held. Of course, didn't your daddy give him the money to buy them?"

Vivenna closed her eyes.

You hold those same Breaths, she told herself. *You're not innocent in all of this.*

She hadn't been given a choice. She could only hope and assume that her father had felt he was in a similar position—no choice but to do what seemed wrong.

Lacking furniture, Vivenna arranged her dress and knelt on the wooden floor, hands in her lap. Denth and Tonk Fah sat back against the wall, looking just as comfortable sitting on a hardwood floor as they were when lounging in plush chairs. "All right, Princess," Denth said, unfolding a paper from his pocket. "We've got some plans for you."

"Please continue, then."

"First," Denth said, "we can get you a meeting with some of Vahr's allies."

"Who exactly was this man?" Vivenna said, frowning. She didn't like the idea of working with revolutionaries.

"Vahr was a worker in the dye fields," Denth said. "Things can get bad out in those fields—long hours, little more than food for pay. About five years back, Vahr got the bright idea that if he could convince enough of the other workers to give him their Breath, he might be able to use the power to start a revolt against the overseers. Became enough of a hero to the people in the outer flower plantations that he actually drew the attention of the Court of Gods."

"Never truly had a chance of starting a real rebellion," Tonk Fah said.

"So what good are his men to us?" Vivenna asked. "If they never had a chance of succeeding."

"Well," Denth said, "you didn't say anything about a rebellion or anything like that. You just want to make it tough for the Hallandren when they go to war."

"Revolts in the fields would sure be a pain during war," Tonk Fah added.

Vivenna nodded. "All right," she said. "Let's meet with them."

"Just so you know, Princess," Denth said. "These aren't particularly . . . sophisticated kinds of folks."

"I am not offended by poverty or people of small means. Austre regards all people equally."

"I didn't mean that," Denth said, rubbing his chin. "It's not that they're peasants, it's that . . . well, when Vahr's little insurrection went bad, these are the people who were smart enough to get out quickly. That means they weren't all that committed to him in the first place."

"In other words," Tonk Fah said, "they were really just a bunch of thugs and crime lords who thought Vahr might be the source of some easy influence or money."

Great, Vivenna thought. "And do we want to associate with people like that?"

Denth shrugged. "We have to start somewhere."

"The other things on the list are a bit more fun," Tonk Fah said.

"And they are?" Vivenna asked.

"Raid the Lifeless storage warehouse, for one," Denth said, smiling. "We won't be able to kill the things—not without drawing the rest of them down on us. But we might be able to muck up the way the creatures work."

"That sounds dangerous," Vivenna said.

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, who opened his eyes. They shared a smile.

"What?" Vivenna asked.

"Hazard pay," Tonk Fah said. "We may not steal your money, but we have nothing against overcharging you for extremely dangerous stunts!"

Vivenna rolled her eyes.

"Beyond that," Denth added, "from what I can tell, Lemex wanted to undermine the city's food supply. It's a good idea, I suppose. Lifeless don't need to eat, but the humans who form the support structure of the army *do*. Disrupt supply, and perhaps people here will begin to worry if they can afford a long-term war."

"That sounds more reasonable," Vivenna said. "What did you come up with?"

"We raid merchant caravans," Denth said. "Burn things up, cost them a bunch. We make it look like bandits or maybe even remnants of Vahr's supporters. That ought to confuse people in T'Telir and maybe make it more difficult for the priests to go to war."

"Priests run a lot of the trade in the city," Tonk Fah added. "They have all the money so they tend to own the supplies. Burn away the stuff they intended to use for the war, and they'll be more hesitant to attack. It'll buy your people more time."

Vivenna swallowed. "Your plans are a bit more . . . violent than I had anticipated."

The mercenaries shared a look.

"You see," Denth said. "This is where we get our bad reputation. People hire us to do difficult things—like undermine a country's ability to wage war—then complain that we're too violent."

"Very unfair," Tonk Fah agreed.

"Perhaps she'd rather we buy puppies for all of her enemies, then send them with nice apologetic notes, asking them to stop being so mean."

"And then," Tonk Fah said, "when they *don't* stop, we could kill the puppies!"

"All right," Vivenna said. "I understand that we'll have to use a firm hand, but . . . really. I don't want the Hallandrens to starve because of what we do."

"Princess," Denth said, sounding more serious. "These people want to attack your homeland. They see your family as the greatest existing threat to their power—and they're going to make certain that nobody of the royal blood lives to challenge them."

"They get a child by your sister to be the next God King," Tonk Fah said, "then they kill every other person of royal blood. They never have to worry about you again."

Denth nodded. "Your father and Lemex were right. The Hallandren have *everything* to lose by not attacking you. And, from what I can see, your people are going to need every bit of help you can give them. That means doing everything we can—scaring the priests, breaking their supply reserves, weakening their armies—to help out."

"We can't stop the war," Tonk Fah added. "We can just make the fight a little more fair."

Vivenna took a deep breath, then nodded. "All right, then, we'll—"

At that moment, the door to the building flew open, slamming against the other side of the wall. Vivenna looked up. A figure stood in the doorway—a tall, bulky man with unusually large muscles and flat features. It took her a moment to register the other oddity about him.

His skin was grey. His eyes too. There was no color to him at all, and her Heightenings told her that he didn't have a single Breath. A Lifeless soldier.

Vivenna scrambled to her feet, barely keeping in a cry of distress. She backed away from the large soldier. It just stood there, immobile, not even breathing. Its eyes tracked her—they didn't just stare ahead like those of a dead man.

For some reason, she found that the most unnerving.

"Denth!" Vivenna said. "What are you doing? Attack!"

The mercenaries remained where they were, lounging on the floor. Tonk Fah barely cracked an eye open. "Ah well," Denth said. "Looks like we've been discovered by the city watch."

"Pity," Tonk Fah said. "This was looking like it would be a fun job."

"Nothing but execution for us now," Denth said.

"Attack!" Vivenna cried. "You're my bodyguards, you're . . ." She trailed off, noticing as the two men began to chuckle.

Oh, Colors, not again, she thought. "What?" she said. "Some kind of joke? Did you paint that man grey? What's going on?"

"Move it, you rock on legs," a voice said from behind the Lifeless. The creature walked into the room, carrying a couple of canvas bags over its shoulders. As it entered, it revealed a shorter woman standing behind. Thick

through the thighs and through the bust, she had light brown hair that came down to her shoulders. She stood with hands on hips, looking upset.

"Denth," she snapped, "he's here. In the city."

"Good," Denth said, lounging back. "I owe that man a sword through the gut."

The woman snorted. "He killed Arsteel. What makes you think you can beat him?"

"I've always been the better swordsman," Denth said calmly.

"Arsteel was good too. Now he's dead. Who's the woman?"

"New employer."

"Hope she lives longer than the last one," the woman grumbled. "Clod, put those down and go get the other bag."

The Lifeless responded, setting down its bags then walking back out. Vivenna watched, by now having figured out that the short woman must be Jewels, the third member of Denth's team. What was she doing with a Lifeless? And how had she found the new house? Denth must have sent her a message.

"What's wrong with you?" Jewels said, glancing at Vivenna. "Some Awakener come by and steal your colors?"

Vivenna paused. "What?"

"She means," Denth said, "why do you look so surprised?"

"That, and her hair is white," Jewels said, walking over to the canvas bags.

Vivenna flushed, realizing that her shock had gotten the better of her. She returned her hair to its proper dark color. The Lifeless was returning, carrying another bag.

"Where did that creature come from?" Vivenna asked.

"What?" Jewels asked. "Clod? Made him from a dead body, obviously. I didn't do it myself—I just paid money for someone else to."

"Too much money," Tonk Fah added.

The creature clomped back into the room. It wasn't unnaturally tall—not like a Returned. It could have been a normal, if well-muscled, man. Only the skin coloring, mixed with the emotionless face, was different.

"She bought him?" Vivenna asked. "When? Just now?"

"Nah," Tonk Fah said, "we've had Clod for months."

"It's useful to have a Lifeless around," Denth said.

"And you didn't tell me about this?" Vivenna asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice. First she'd had to deal with the city and all of its

colors and people. Then she was given a dose of unwanted Breath. Now she was confronted by the most unholy of abominations.

"The topic didn't come up," Denth said, shrugging. "They're pretty common in T'Telir."

"We were just talking about defeating these things," Vivenna said. "Not embracing them!"

"We talked about defeating *some* of them," Denth said. "Princess, Lifeless are like swords. They're tools. We can't destroy *all* of them in the city, nor would we want to. Just the ones being used by your enemies."

Vivenna slid down, sitting on the wooden floor. The Lifeless set down its final bag, then Jewels pointed toward the corner. It walked over and stood there, patiently waiting for further orders.

"Here," Jewels said to the other two, untying the final large bag. "You wanted these." She turned it on its side, exposing glittering metal shining within.

Denth smiled, rising. He kicked Tonk Fah back awake—the large man had an uncanny ability to fall asleep at a moment's notice—and walked over to the bag. He pulled out several swords, shiny and new-looking with long, thin blades. Denth made a few practice swings while Tonk Fah wandered over, pulling out wicked-looking daggers, some shorter swords, and then some leather jerkins.

Vivenna sat, back against the wall, using her breathing to calm herself. She tried not to feel threatened by the Lifeless in the corner. How could they just go about, ignoring it like that? It was so unnatural that it made her itch and squirm. Eventually, Denth noticed her. He told Tonk Fah to oil the blades, then walked over and sat down in front of Vivenna, leaning back with hands against the floor behind him.

"That Lifeless is going to be a problem, Princess?" he asked.

"Yes," she said curtly.

"Then we'll need to work it out," he said, meeting her eyes. "My team can't function if you tie our hands. Jewels has invested a lot of effort into learning the proper Commands to use a Lifeless, not to mention learning to maintain the thing."

"We don't need her."

"Yes," Denth said. "Yes we *do.* Princess, you've brought a lot of biases into this city. It's not my place to tell you what to do with them. I'm just your

employee. But I will tell you that you don't know half the things you think you do."

"It's not about what I 'think I know,' Denth," Vivenna said. "It's what I *believe.* A person's body shouldn't be abused by making it come back to life and serve you."

"Why not?" he asked. "Your own theology says a soul leaves when the body dies. The corpse is just recycled dirt. Why not use it?"

"It's wrong," Vivenna said.

"The family of the corpse was well paid for the body."

"Doesn't matter," Vivenna said.

Denth leaned forward. "Well, fine then. But if you order Jewels away, you order us all away. I'll give your money back, then we'll go hire you another team of bodyguards. You can use them instead."

"I thought you were my employee," Vivenna snapped.

"I am," Denth said. "But I can quit whenever I want."

She sat quietly, stomach unsettled.

"Your father was willing to use means that he didn't agree with," Denth said. "Judge him if you must, but tell me this. If using a Lifeless could save your kingdom, who are you to ignore the opportunity?"

"Why do you care?" Vivenna asked.

"I just don't like leaving things unfinished."

Vivenna glanced away.

"Look at it this way, Princess," he said. "You can work with us—which will give you chances to explain your views, maybe change our minds on things like Lifeless and BioChroma. Or you can send us away. But if you reject us because of our sins, aren't you being ostentatious? Don't the Five Visions say something about that?"

Vivenna frowned. *How does he know so much about Austrism?* "I'll think about it," she said. "Why did Jewels bring all those swords?"

"We'll need weapons," Denth said. "You know, has to do with that violence thing we mentioned earlier."

"You don't have any already?"

Denth shrugged. "Tonk usually has a cudgel or knife on him, but a full sword draws attention in T'Telir. It's best not to stand out, sometimes. Your people have some interesting wisdom in that area."

"But now . . ."

"Now we don't really have a choice," he said. "If we keep moving forward with Lemex's plans, things are going to get dangerous." He eyed her. "Which reminds me. I have something else for you to think about."

"What?"

"Those Breaths you hold," Denth said. "They're a tool. Just like the Lifeless. Now, I know you don't agree with how they were obtained. But the fact is, you have them. If a dozen slaves die to forge a sword, does it do any good to melt down the sword and refuse to use it? Or is it better to use that sword and try to stop the men who did such evil in the first place?"

"What are you saying?" Vivenna said, feeling that she probably already knew.

"You should learn to use the Breaths," Denth said. "Tonks and I could sure use an Awakener backing us up."

Vivenna closed her eyes. Did he have to hit her with that now, right after twisting around her concerns about the Lifeless? She had expected to find uncertainties and obstacles in T'Telir. She just hadn't expected so many difficult decisions. And she hadn't expected them to endanger her soul.

"I'm not going to become an Awakener, Denth," Vivenna said quietly. "I might turn a blind eye toward that Lifeless, for now. But I will *not* Awaken. I expect to take these Breaths to my death so that nobody else can benefit from harvesting them. No matter what you say, if you buy that sword forged by overworked slaves, then you'll just encourage the evil merchants."

Denth fell silent. Then he nodded, standing. "You're the boss, and it's your kingdom. If we fail, the only thing *I* lose is an employer."

"Denth," Jewels said, approaching. She barely gave Vivenna a glance. "I don't like this. I don't like the fact that *he* got here first. He has Breath—reports say he looked to have reached at least the Fourth Heightening. Maybe the Fifth. I'll bet he got it from that rebel, Vahr."

"How do you even know it's him?" Denth asked.

Jewels snorted. "Word's all over. People being found slaughtered in alleyways, the wounds corrupt and black. Sightings of a new, powerful Awakener roaming the city carrying a black-handled sword in a silver sheath. It's Tax, all right. Goes by a different name now."

Denth nodded. "Vasher. He's used it for a while. It's a joke on his part."

Vivenna frowned. *Black-handled sword. Silver sheath. The man at the arena?* "Who are we talking about?"

Jewels shot her an annoyed look, but Denth just shrugged. "Old . . . friend of ours."

"He's bad trouble," Tonk Fah said, walking up. "Tax tends to leave a lot of bodies in his wake. Has strange motivations—doesn't think like other people."

"He's interested in the war for some reason, Denth," Jewels said.

"Let him be," Denth snapped. "That will just bring him across my path all the sooner." He turned away, waving a hand indifferently. Vivenna watched him go, noting the frustration in his step, the curtness of his motions.

"What is wrong with him?" she asked Tonk Fah.

"Tax—or, I guess, Vasher—" Tonk Fah said. "He killed a good friend of ours over in Yarn Dred a couple months back. Denth used to have four people in this team."

"It shouldn't have happened," Jewels said. "Arsteel was a brilliant duelist—almost as good as Denth. Vasher's never been able to beat either of them."

"He used that . . . sword of his," Tonk Fah grumbled.

"There was no blackness around the wound," Jewels said.

"Then he cut the blackness out," Tonk Fah snapped, watching Denth belt a sword to his waist. "There's no way Vasher beat Arsteel in a fair duel. *No* way."

"This Vasher," Vivenna found herself saying. "I saw him."

Jewels and Tonk Fah turned sharply.

"He was at the court yesterday," Vivenna said. "Tall man, carrying a sword when nobody else did. It had a black hilt and a silver sheath. He looked ragged. Hair unkempt, beard scraggly, clothing ripped in places. Only a rope for a belt. He was watching me from behind. He looked . . . dangerous."

Tonk Fah cursed quietly.

"That's him," Jewels said. "Denth!"

"What?" Denth asked.

Jewels gestured at Vivenna. "He's a step ahead of us. Been tailing your princess here. She saw him watching her at the court."

"Colors!" Denth swore, snapping a dueling blade into the sheath at his waist. "Colors, Colors, *Colors*!"

"What?" Vivenna asked, paling. "Maybe it was just a coincidence. He could have just come to watch the court."

Denth shook his head. "There *are* no coincidences where that man is

concerned, Princess. If he was watching you, then you can bet on the Colors that he knows exactly who you are and where you came from." He met her eyes. "And he's probably planning to kill you."

Vivenna fell silent.

Tonk Fah laid a hand on her shoulder. "Ah, don't worry, Vivenna. He wants to kill *us* too. At least you're in good company."

20

For the first time in her several weeks at the palace, Siri stood before the God King's door and felt neither worried nor tired.

Bluefingers, oddly, wasn't scribbling on his pad. He watched her silently, expression unreadable.

Siri almost smiled to herself. Gone were the days when she'd had to lie on the floor, awkwardly trying to kneel while her back complained. Gone were the days when she had to fall asleep on the marble, her discarded dress her only comfort. Ever since she'd grown daring enough to climb into the bed the previous week, she'd slept well each night, comfortable and warm. And not once had she been touched by the God King.

It was a nice arrangement. The priests—apparently satisfied that she was doing her wifely duty—left her alone. She didn't have to be naked in front of anyone, and she was beginning to learn the social dynamic of the palace. She'd even gone to a few more sessions of the Court Assembly, though she hadn't mingled with the Returned.

"Vessel," Bluefingers said quietly.

She turned toward him, raising an eyebrow.

He shuffled uncomfortably. "You . . . have found a way to make the king respond to your advances, then?"

"That got out, did it?" she asked, looking back at the door. Inside, her smile deepened.

"Indeed it did, Vessel," Bluefingers said, tapping his ledger from beneath. "Only those in the palace know about any of this, of course."

Good, Siri thought. She glanced to the side.

Bluefingers did not look pleased.

"What?" she asked. "I'm out of danger. The priests can stop worrying about an heir." *For a few months, at least. They'll get suspicious eventually.*

"Vessel," Bluefingers said with a harsh whisper. "Doing your duty as the Vessel *was* the danger!"

She frowned, looking at Bluefingers as the little scribe tapped his board. "Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods . . ." he whispered to himself.

"What?" she asked.

"I shouldn't say."

"Then what is the point of bringing it up in the first place! Honestly, Bluefingers, you're getting frustrating. Leave me too confused, and I might just start asking questions—"

"No!" Bluefingers said sharply, then immediately glanced behind him, cringing slightly. "Vessel, you must not speak to others of my fears. They're silly, really, nothing to bother anyone else with. Just . . ."

"What?" she asked.

"You *must* not bear him a child," Bluefingers said. "That is the danger, both to yourself and to the God King himself. This all . . . everything here in the palace . . . it is not what it appears to be."

"That's what everyone says," she snapped. "If it's not what it seems, then tell me what it *is.*"

"There is no need," Bluefingers said. "And I will not speak of this again. After tonight, you will conduct yourself to the bedchamber—you obviously have the pattern down well enough. Just wait a hundred heartbeats or so after the women let you out of the dressing room."

"You have to tell me something!" Siri said.

"Vessel," Bluefingers said, leaning in. "I advise you to please keep your voice down. You don't know how many factions shift and move inside the palace. I am a member of many of them, and a stray word on your part could . . . no, *would* . . . mean my death. Do you understand that? *Can* you understand that?"

She hesitated.

"I should *not* be putting my life in danger because of you," he said. "But there are things about this arrangement with which I do not agree. And so, I give my warning. Avoid giving the God King a child. If you want to know more than that, read your histories. Honestly, I would think that you'd have come to all this a little more prepared."

And with that, the little man left.

Siri shook her head, then sighed and pushed open the door and entered the God King's chamber. She closed the door, then eyed the God King—who watched her, as always—and pulled off her dress, leaving her shift on. She went to the bed and sat down, waiting a few minutes before climbing up on her knees to do her bouncing, moaning act. She varied it sometimes, doing several different rhythms, getting creative.

Once she was done, she snuggled down in the blankets and lay back in the pillows to think. *Could Bluefingers have been any more obscure?* she thought with frustration. What little Siri knew of political intrigue told her that people preferred to be subtle—obscure, even—to protect themselves from implication.

Read your histories. . . .

It seemed an odd suggestion. If the secrets were that visible, then why would they be dangerous?

Still, as she thought, she did find herself feeling grateful for Bluefingers. She couldn't really blame him for his hesitation. He'd probably already endangered himself far more than he should have. Without him, she wouldn't have known she was in danger.

In a way, he was the only friend she had in the city—a person like herself, a person drawn in from another country. A country that was overshadowed by beautiful, bold Hallandren. A man who . . .

Her thoughts trailed off; she felt something odd. She opened her eyes.

Someone loomed over her in the darkness.

Despite herself, Siri screamed in surprise. The God King jumped back, stumbling. Heart thumping, Siri shuffled backward on the bed, pulling the covers up over her chest—though, of course, he had seen her unclothed so often that it was a ridiculous gesture.

The God King stood in his dark black clothing, looking uncertain in the hearth's wavering light. She'd never asked her servants why he wore black. One would think that he would prefer white, which he could affect so dramatically with his BioChroma.

For a few moments, Siri sat with the blankets clutched before her, then forced herself to relax. *Stop being so silly,* she told herself. *He's never so much as threatened you.*

"It's all right," she said softly. "You just startled me."

He glanced at her. And—with a jolt of surprise—she realized this was the first time she'd addressed him since her outburst the previous week. Now that he stood, she could see even better how . . . heroic he looked. Tall, broad-shouldered, like a statue. Human, but of more dramatic proportions. Carefully, showing more uncertainty than she'd ever expected from a man who had the title of God King, he moved back to the bed. He sat down on its edge.

Then he reached to his shirt, pulling it up.

Oh, Austre, she thought with sudden shock. *Oh, God, Lord of Colors! This is it! He's finally coming for me!*

She couldn't fight off the trembles. She'd convinced herself that she was safe, comfortable. She shouldn't have to go through this. Not again!

I can't do it! I can't! I—

The God King pulled something out from underneath his shirt, then let the garment drape back down. Siri sat, breath coming in gasps, slowly realizing that he was making no further moves toward her. She calmed herself, forcing the color back into her hair. The God King laid the object on the bed, and the firelight revealed it to be . . . a book. Siri immediately thought of the histories Bluefingers had mentioned, but she quickly discarded the idea. This book, from the title on the spine, was a book of stories for children.

The God King let his fingers rest on it, then he delicately opened to the first page. The white parchment bent in the force of his BioChroma, shooting out prismatic colors. This didn't distort the text, and Siri carefully inched forward, looking at the words.

She looked up at the God King. His face seemed less stiff than usual. He nodded down at the page, then pointed at the first word.

"You want me to read this?" Siri asked in a low whisper, mindful of the priests who might be listening.

The God King nodded.

"It says 'Stories for Children,' " Siri said, confused.

He turned the book around, looking at it himself. He rubbed his chin in thought.

What's going on? she thought. It didn't seem like he was going to bed her. Did he, instead, expect her to read a story to him? She couldn't imagine him asking for something that childish. She looked up at him again. He turned the book around, pointing at the first word. He nodded toward it.

"Stories?" Siri asked.

He pointed at the word. She looked closely, trying to discern some hidden meaning or mysterious text. She sighed, looking up at him. "Why don't you just tell me?"

He paused, cocking his head. Then he opened his mouth. By the waning light of the hearth's fire, Siri saw something shocking.

The God King of Hallandren had no tongue.

There was a scar. She could just barely see it if she squinted closely. Something had happened to him, some terrible accident had ripped it free. Or . . . had it been taken purposefully? Why would anyone remove the tongue of the king himself?

The answer came to her almost immediately.

BioChromatic Breath, she realized, thinking back to a half-remembered lesson from her childhood. *To Awaken objects, a person must give a Command. Words spoken in a crisp, clear voice. No slurring or mumbling allowed, or the Breath will not function.*

The God King looked away, suddenly, seeming ashamed. He picked up the book, holding it to his chest, and moved to stand.

"No, please," Siri said, edging forward. She reached her hand forward and touched his arm.

The God King froze. She immediately pulled her hand back. "I didn't mean to look so disgusted," Siri said in her whispered voice. "That wasn't because of . . . your mouth. It was because I was realizing why it must have been done to you."

The God King studied her, then slowly seated himself again. He held himself back far enough that they were not touching, and she did not reach for him again. However, he did carefully—almost reverently—put his book back down on the bed. He opened to the first page again, then looked at her, his eyes pleading.

"You can't read, can you?" Siri asked.

He shook his head.

"That's the secret," she whispered. "The thing that scares Bluefingers so

much. You're not king, you're a puppet! A *figurehead.* You're paraded around by your priests, given a BioChromatic aura so strong that it makes people fall to their knees in wonder. Yet they took your tongue so that you couldn't ever use it, and they never taught you to read, lest you learn too much or manage to communicate with others."

He sat and looked away.

"All so that they could control you." *No wonder Bluefingers is so scared. If they would do that to their own god . . . then the rest of us are nothing to them.*

It made sense, now, why they had been so adamant about her not talking to—or even kissing—the king. It made sense why they would dislike her so much. They were worried about someone spending time alone with the God King. Someone who might discover the truth.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He shook his head, then met her eyes. There was a strength in them she wouldn't have expected of a man who had been sheltered and isolated as he must have been. Finally, he looked down, pointing back at the words on the page. The first word. The first letter, actually.

"That is the letter 'shash,' " Siri said, smiling. "I can teach you them all, if you wish."

The priests were right to be worried.

21

Vasher stood atop the palace of the God King, watching the sun drop above the western rain forest. The sunset was vibrant amidst the clouds, colors flaring, beautiful reds and oranges painting the trees. Then the sun disappeared and the colors faded.

Some said that before a man died, his BioChromatic aura flared with sudden brightness. Like a heart giving its last beat, like the final surge of a wave before the tide retreats. Vasher had seen it happen, but not with every death. The event was rare, much like a perfect sunset.

Dramatic, Nightblood noted.

The sunset? Vasher asked.

Yes.

You can't see it, he said to the sword.

But I can feel *you seeing it. Crimson. Like blood in the air.*

Vasher didn't respond. The sword couldn't see. But with its powerful, twisted BioChroma, it could sense life and people. Both were things Nightblood had been created to protect. It was strange, how easily and quickly protection could cause destruction. Sometimes, Vasher wondered if the two weren't really the same thing. Protect a flower, destroy the pests who wanted to feed on it. Protect a building, destroy the plants that could have grown in the soil.

Protect a man. Live with the destruction he creates.

Although it was dark, Vasher's life sense was strong. He could just faintly

feel the grass growing below and knew how far away it was. With more Breath, he might even have been able to sense the lichen growing on the palace stones. He knelt down, laying one hand on his trouser leg and one on the stone of the palace.

"Strengthen me," he Commanded, Breathing. His trouser legs stiffened, and a patch of color bled from the black stone beside him. Black was a color. He'd never considered that before he'd become an Awakener. Tassels hanging at his cuffs stiffened, wrapping around his ankle. With him kneeling as he was, they could also twist around the bottoms of his feet.

Vasher placed a hand on the shoulder of his shirt, touching another patch of marble as he formed an image in his mind. "Upon call, become my fingers and grip," he Commanded. The shirt quivered and a group of tassels curled up around his hand. Five of them, like fingers.

It was a difficult Command. It required far more Breath to Awaken than he would have liked—his remaining Breath barely allowed him the Second Heightening—and the visualization of the Command had taken practice to perfect. The finger tassels were worth it; they had proven very useful, and he was loath to engage in the night's activities without them.

He stood up straight, noting the scar of grey marble on the otherwise perfectly black palace surface. He smiled to think of the indignation the priests would feel when they discovered it.

He tested the strength in his legs, gripping Nightblood, then took a careful step off the side of the palace. He fell some ten feet; the palace was constructed from massive stone blocks in a steep pyramidal shape. He landed hard on the next block, but his Awakened clothing absorbed some of the shock, acting like a second, external set of bones. He stood up, nodding to himself, then jumped down the other pyramid steps.

Eventually, he landed on the soft grass north of the palace, close to the wall that surrounded the entire plateau. He crouched, watching quietly.

Sneaking, Vasher? Nightblood said. *You're terrible at sneaking.*

Vasher didn't respond.

You should attack, Nightblood said. *You're good at that.*

You just want to prove how strong you are, Vasher thought.

Well, yes, the sword replied. *But you do have to admit that you're bad at sneaking.*

Vasher ignored the sword. A lone man in ragged clothing carrying a

sword across the grounds would be conspicuous. So he surveyed. He had picked a night when the gods hadn't planned any grand celebrations out in the courtyard, but there were still small groups of priests, minstrels, or servants moving between palaces.

How sure are you about this information of yours? Nightblood said. *Because, honestly, I don't trust priests.*

He isn't a priest, Vasher thought. He moved carefully, creeping through the dark starlit shadow of the wall's overhang. His contact had warned him to stay away from the palaces of influential gods like Blushweaver and Stillmark. But he had also said that the palace of a lesser god—like Giftbeacon or Peaceyearning—wouldn't work for Vasher's purpose. Instead, Vasher sought out the home of Mercystar, a Returned known for her involvement in politics, yet who wasn't all that influential.

Her palace looked relatively dark this evening, but there would still be guards. Hallandren Returned all had servants to spare. Sure enough, Vasher located two men watching the door he wanted. They wore the extravagant costumes of court servants, colored yellow and gold after the pattern of their mistress.

The men weren't armed. Who would attack the home of a Returned? They were simply there to keep anyone from wandering in and bothering their lady while she slept. They stood by their lanterns, alert and attentive, but more for the sake of appearances than anything else.

Vasher obscured Nightblood beneath his cloak, then walked out of the darkness, looking from side to side anxiously, mumbling to himself. He hunched his body to help hide the oversized hidden sword.

Oh, please, Nightblood said flatly. *The crazy disguise? You're cleverer than that.*

It'll work, Vasher thought. *This is the Court of Gods. Nothing attracts the unbalanced more than the prospect of meeting deities.*

The two guards looked up when they saw him approaching, but they didn't seem surprised. They had probably dealt with marginally insane people every day of their professional careers. Vasher had seen the types who ended up in the lines for Returned petitions.

"Here now," one of the men said as Vasher approached. "How'd you get in here?"

Vasher stepped up to them, mumbling to himself about talking to the god-

dess. The second man put a hand on Vasher's shoulder. "Come on, friend. Let's get you back to the gates and see if there's a shelter that's still taking people in for the night."

Vasher hesitated. Kindness. He hadn't expected that, for some reason. The emotion made him feel a tad guilty for what he had to do next.

He snapped his arm to the side, twitching his thumb twice to make the long finger tassels on his shirt sleeve begin mimicking the motions of his real fingers. He formed a fist. The tassels snapped forward, wrapping around the first guard's neck.

The man choked out a soft gasp of surprise. Before the second guard could react, Vasher brought Nightblood up, ramming the hilt into the guard's stomach. The man stumbled, and Vasher swept his feet out from beneath him. Vasher's boot followed, coming down slowly but firmly on the man's neck. He wiggled, but Vasher's legs bore Awakened strength.

Vasher stood for a long moment, both men struggling, neither managing to escape their strangulation. A short time later, Vasher stepped off the second guard's neck, then lowered the first guard to the grass, twitching his thumb twice and releasing the finger tassels.

You didn't use me much, Nightblood said, sounding hurt. *You could have used me. I'm better than a shirt. I'm a sword.*

Vasher ignored the comments, scanning the darkness to see if he had been spotted.

I really am better than a shirt. I would have killed them. Look, they're still breathing. Stupid shirt.

That was the point, Vasher thought. *Corpses cause more trouble than men who get knocked out.*

I could knock people out, Nightblood said immediately.

Vasher shook his head, ducking into the building. Returned palaces—this one included—were generally just collections of open rooms with colorful sheets on the doorways. The weather was so temperate in Hallandren that the building could be open to the air at all times.

He didn't go through the central rooms, but instead stayed in the peripheral servant hallway. If Vasher's informant had been truthful, then what he wanted could be found on the northeast side of the building. As he walked, he unraveled the rope from his waist.

Belts are stupid too, Nightblood said. *They—*

At that moment, a group of four servants rounded the corner directly ahead of Vasher. Vasher looked up, startled but not really surprised.

The servants' shock lasted a second longer than his own. Within a heartbeat, Vasher snapped the rope forward. "Hold things," he Commanded, giving up most of his remaining Breath. The rope rapped around the arm of one of the servants, though Vasher had been aiming for the neck. Vasher cursed, yanking the person forward. The man cried out as Vasher knocked him against the angle of the corner. The others moved to run.

Vasher whipped out Nightblood with his other hand.

Yes! the sword thought.

Vasher didn't draw the sword. He simply tossed it forward. The blade skidded against the floor, then came to rest before the three men. One of the group froze, looking down at the sword, transfixed. He reached out tentatively, eyes awed.

The other two took off running, yelling about an intruder.

Blast! Vasher thought. He yanked the rope, knocking the entangled servant off of his feet again. As the servant tried to stumble to his feet, Vasher dashed forward and wrapped the rope around the man's hands and body. To his side, the remaining servant ignored both Vasher and his friend. This man picked up Nightblood, eyes alight. He undid the snap on the hilt, moving to pull the sword.

When he had barely gotten a thin sliver of blade free, a dark, fluidlike smoke began to stream out. Some dripped to the ground; other tendrils of it snaked out and wrapped around the man's arm, drawing the color from his skin.

Vasher kicked out with an Awakened leg, knocking the man down, forcing him to drop Nightblood. Vasher left the first man squirming, tied up, then grabbed the man who had held the sword and rammed his head against the wall.

Breathing hard, Vasher grabbed Nightblood, closed the sheath, and did up the clasp. Then he reached over, touching the rope that tied the dazed servant. "Your Breath to mine," he said, recovering the Breath from the rope, leaving the man bound.

You didn't let me kill him, Nightblood said, annoyed.

No, Vasher said. *Corpses, remember?*

And . . . two ran away from me. That's not right.

You cannot tempt the hearts of men who are pure, Nightblood. No matter how much he explained that concept, it seemed beyond the sword's ability to comprehend.

Vasher moved quickly, dashing down the hallway. He had only a little farther to go, but there were already cries of alarm and calls for help. He had no desire to fight an army of servants and soldiers. He stopped, uncertain, in the unadorned hallway. He noticed, idly, that Awakening the rope had inadvertently stolen the color from his boots and cloak—the only pieces of clothing he wore that weren't themselves Awakened.

The grey clothing would instantly brand him for what he was. But the thought of backing down made him cringe. He gritted his teeth in frustration, punching the wall. This was supposed to have gone a lot more smoothly.

I told you, you aren't sneaky, Nightblood said.

Shut up, Vasher thought, determined not to run. He reached into a pouch at his belt, pulling out the object within: a dead squirrel.

Yuck, Nightblood said with a sniff.

Vasher knelt, putting a hand on the creature.

"Awaken to my Breath," he Commanded, "serve my needs, live at my Command and my word. Fallen Rope."

Those last words, "fallen rope," formed the security phrase. Vasher could have chosen anything, but he picked the first thing that came to mind.

One Breath was leached from his body, going down into the small rodent's corpse. The thing began to twitch. That was a Breath Vasher would never be able to recover, for creating a Lifeless was a permanent act. The squirrel lost all color, bleeding to grey, the Awakening feeding off the body's own colors to help fuel the transformation. The squirrel had been grey in the first place, so the difference was tough to see. That's why Vasher liked to use them.

"Fallen Rope," he said to the creature, its grey eyes looking up at him. The security phrase pronounced, Vasher could now imprint the creature with an order, much as he did when performing a standard Awakening. "Make noise. Run around. Bite people who are not me. Fallen Rope." The second use of the words closed its impressionability, so it could no longer be Commanded.

The squirrel hopped up to its feet then scampered down the hallway, heading for the open doorway the fleeing servants had disappeared into. Vasher stood and began to run again, hoping that this distraction would earn him time. Indeed, a few moments later he heard cries coming from the doorway.

Clangs and screams followed. Lifeless could be difficult to stop, particularly a fresh one with orders to bite.

Vasher smiled.

We could have taken them, Nightblood said.

Vasher rushed to the place his information had indicated. The location was marked by a splintered board in the wall, ostensibly just normal wear of the building. Vasher crouched, hoping that his informant had not lied. He searched around on the floor, then froze as he found the hidden latch.

He pulled it open, revealing a trapdoor. Returned palaces were only supposed to be one story. He smiled.

What if this tunnel doesn't have another way out? Nightblood asked as Vasher dropped into the hole, trusting his Awakened clothing to absorb the fall.

Then you'll probably get to kill a lot of people, Vasher thought. However, his information had been good so far. He suspected that the rest was good as well.

The priests of the Iridescent Tones, it appeared, were hiding things from the rest of the kingdom. And from their gods.

22

Weatherlove, god of storms, selected one of the wooden spheres from the rack, then hefted it in his hand. It had been built to fill the palm of a god, and was weighted in the middle with lead. Carved with rings across the surface, it was painted a deep blue.

"A doubling sphere?" asked Lifeblesser. "A bold move."

Weatherlove eyed the small group of gods behind him. Lightsong was among them, sipping on a sweet orange fruited drink with some kind of alcohol enhancement. It had been several days since he'd allowed Llarimar to talk him out of bed, but he still had come to no conclusion on how to proceed.

"A bold move indeed," Weatherlove said, tossing the sphere up into the air, then catching it. "Tell me, Lightsong the Bold. Do you favor this throw?"

The other gods chuckled. There were four of them playing. As usual, Weatherlove wore a green and gold robe that hung from only one shoulder with a wrap around his waist that came down to mid-thigh. The outfit—patterned after the ancient dress of the Returned from paintings centuries past—revealed his sculpted muscles and divine figure. He stood at the edge of the balcony, as it was his turn to throw.

Seated behind him were the three others. Lightsong on the left and Lifeblesser—god of healing—in the middle. Truthcall, god of nature, sat on the far right, wearing his ornate cloak and uniform of maroon and white.

The three gods were variations on a theme. If Lightsong hadn't known them well, he would have had trouble telling them apart. Each stood almost

exactly seven feet tall, with bulging muscles that any mortal would have envied. True, Lifeblesser had brown hair, while Weatherlove had blond and Truthcall had black. But all three had that same set of square-jawed features, perfect coiffure, and innate seamless grace that marked them as Returned divinities. Only their costumes really offered any variety.

Lightsong sipped his drink. "Do I bless your throw, Weatherlove?" he asked. "Are we not in competition against one another?"

"I suppose," the god said, tossing the wooden ball up and down.

"Then why would I bless you when you throw against me?"

Weatherlove just smirked, then pulled back his arm and launched the ball out across the pitch. It bounced, then rolled over the grass, eventually coming to rest. This section of the courtyard had been divided into an expansive game board with ropes and stakes. Priests and servants scurried about on the sides, making notations and keeping track of the score so that the gods wouldn't have to. Tarachin was a complex game, played only by the wealthy. Lightsong had never bothered to learn the rules.

He found it more amusing to play when he had no idea what he was doing.

It was his throw next. He stood up, selecting one of the wooden spheres from the rack because it matched the color of his drink. He tossed the orange sphere up and down; then—not paying attention to where he was throwing—he tossed it out onto the field. The sphere flew much farther than it probably should have; he had the strength of a perfect body. That was part of the reason the field was so vast; it had to be built to the scale of gods, and so when they played, they required the elevated perspective of a balcony to view their game.

Tarachin was supposed to be one of the most difficult games in the world; it required strength to throw the spheres correctly, keen wit to understand where to place them, coordination to do so with the necessary precision, and a great understanding of strategy to pick the proper sphere and dominate the game field.

"Four hundred and thirteen points," a servant announced after being fed the number by scribes working below.

"Another magnificent throw," Truthcall said, perking up in his wooden lounging chair. "How do you do it? I'd *never* have thought to use a reversal sphere for that throw."

Is that what the orange ones are called? Lightsong thought, returning to his seat. "You just have to understand the playing field," he said, "and learn to get inside the mind of the sphere. Think like it does, reason as it might."

"Reason like a sphere?" Lifeblesser said, standing up. He wore flowing robes of his colors, blue and silver. He selected a green sphere off the rack, then stared at it. "What type of reasoning does a wooden sphere do?"

"The circular type, I should think," Lightsong said lightly. "And, by coincidence, it is my favorite type as well. Perhaps that's why I'm so good at the game."

Lifeblesser frowned, opening his mouth to reply. He finally shut it, looking confused by Lightsong's comment. Becoming a god did not, unfortunately, increase one's mental capacity along with one's physical attributes. Lightsong didn't mind. For him, the real sport of a game of Tarachin never involved where the spheres landed.

Lifeblesser made his throw, then sat down. "I do say, Lightsong," he said, smiling. "I mean this as a compliment, but having you around can be draining!"

"Yes," Lightsong said, sipping his drink, "I'm remarkably like a mosquito in that regard. Truthcall, isn't it your throw?"

"Actually, it's yours again," Weatherlove said. "You achieved the crown pairing during your last toss, remember?"

"Ah yes, how could I forget," Lightsong said, rising. He took another sphere, tossed it over his shoulder out onto the green, then sat down.

"Five hundred and seven points," the priest announced.

"Now you're just showing off," Truthcall said.

Lightsong said nothing. In his opinion, it revealed an inherent flaw in the game that the one who knew least about it tended to do the best. He doubted, however, that the others would take it that way. All three were very dedicated to their sport, and they played every week. There was blessed little else for them to do with their time.

Lightsong suspected that they kept inviting him only because they wanted to prove, at last, that they could defeat him. If he'd fathomed the rules, he'd have tried to lose on purpose to keep them from insisting that he come play with them. Still, he liked the way his victories annoyed them—though, of course, they never showed him anything other than perfect decorum. Either

way, under the circumstances, he suspected that he couldn't lose if he wanted to. It was rather difficult to throw a game when you had no idea what you were doing to win it in the first place.

Truthcall finally stepped up to throw. He always wore clothing of a martial style, and the colors maroon and white were very handsome on him. Lightsong suspected that he'd always been jealous that instead of being given Lifeless Commands as his duty to the court, he'd been given a vote over issues of trade with other kingdoms.

"I hear that you spoke with the queen a few days back, Lightsong," Truthcall said as he threw.

"Yes, indeed," Lightsong said, sipping his drink. "She was extraordinarily pleasant, I must say."

Weatherlove gave a quiet laugh, obviously thinking that last comment to be sarcasm—which was a little annoying, since Lightsong had meant it sincerely.

"The entire court is abuzz," Truthcall said, turning and flipping back his cape, then leaning against the balcony railing as he waited for the points from his throw to be tabulated. "The Idrians betrayed the treaty, one could say."

"The wrong princess," Weatherlove agreed. "It gives us an opening."

"Yes," Truthcall said musingly, "but an opening for what?"

"To attack!" Lifeblesser said in his usual, dense way. The other two regarded him wincingly.

"There is so much more to be gained than that, Lifeblesser."

"Yes," Weatherlove said, idly spinning the last bit of wine in his cup. "My plans are already in motion, of course."

"And what plans would those be, divine brother?" Truthcall said.

Weatherlove smiled. "I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise, now, would I?"

"That depends," Truthcall said evenly. "Will it keep me from demanding the Idrians give us more access to the passes? I'm willing to bet that some . . . pressures could be placed on the new queen could to gain her favor for such a proposal. She's said to be rather naive."

Lightsong felt a slight nausea as they spoke. He knew how they plotted, always scheming. They played their game with spheres, but just as much of their reason for seeing one another at these events was to posture and make deals.

"Her ignorance must be an act," Lifeblesser said in a rare moment of

thoughtfulness. "They wouldn't have sent her if she was really that inexperienced."

"She's Idrian," Truthcall said dismissively. "Their most important city has fewer people than a small T'Telir neighborhood. They barely understand the concept of politics, I'll warrant. They are more used to talking to sheep than humans."

Weatherlove nodded. "Even if she's 'well trained' by their standards, she'll be easy to manipulate here. The real trick is going to be to make certain others don't get to her first. Lightsong, what was your impression? Will she be quick to do as the gods tell her?"

"I really wouldn't know," he said, waving for more juice. "As you know, I'm not much interested in political games."

Weatherlove and Truthcall shared a smirking look; like most in the court, they considered Lightsong hopeless when it came to practical matters. And by their definition, "practical" meant "taking advantage of others."

"Lightsong," Lifeblesser said with his tactlessly honest voice. "You really need to take more of an interest in politics. It can be very diverting. Why, if you only knew the secrets to which I'm privy!"

"My dear Lifeblesser," Lightsong replied, "please trust me when I say that I have *no* desire to know any secrets which involve you and a privy."

Lifeblesser frowned, obviously trying to work through that one.

The other two began to discuss the queen again as the priests reported the score from the last throw. Oddly, Lightsong found himself increasingly troubled. As Lifeblesser stood up to take his next toss, Lightsong found himself rising as well.

"My divine brothers," he said, "I suddenly feel quite weary. Perhaps it was something I ingested."

"Not something I served, I hope?" Truthcall said. It was his palace.

"Food, no," Lightsong said. "The other things you're serving today, perhaps. I really must be on my way."

"But you're in the lead!" Truthcall said. "If you leave now, we'll have to play again next week!"

"Your threats roll off of me like water, my divine brother," Lightsong said, nodding respectfully to each in turn. "I bid you farewell until such time as you drag me up here again to play this tragic game of yours."

They laughed. He wasn't sure whether to be amused or insulted that they so often confused his jokes for serious statements and the other way around.

He collected his priests—Llarimar included—from the room just inside the balcony, but didn't feel like speaking with any of them. He just made his way through the palace of deep reds and whites, still troubled. The men on the balcony were rank amateurs compared to the *real* political masters, like Blushweaver. They were so blunt and obvious with their plans.

But even men who were blunt and obvious could be dangerous, particularly to a woman like the queen, who obviously had little experience with such things.

I've already determined that I can't help her, Lightsong thought, leaving the palace and entering the green outside. To the right, a complex network of rope squares and patterns marked the Tarachin pitch. A sphere bounced with a distant thud in the grass. Lightsong walked the other direction on the springy lawn, not even waiting for his priests to erect a canopy to shade him from the afternoon sun.

He still worried that if he tried to help, he'd just make things worse. But then there were the dreams. War and violence. Over and over again, he saw the fall of T'Telir itself, the destruction of his homeland. He couldn't continue to ignore the dreams, even if he didn't accept them as prophetic.

Blushweaver thought that war was important. Or, at least, that it was important to prepare for. He trusted her more than any other god or goddess, but he also worried about how aggressive she was. She had come to him, asking him to be a part of her plans. Had she done it, perhaps, because she knew he would be more temperate than she? Was she intentionally balancing herself?

He heard petitions, even though he didn't intend to ever give up his Breath and die. He interpreted paintings, even though he didn't think he was seeing anything prophetic in them. Couldn't he help secure power in the court in order to be prepared when he didn't believe that his visions meant anything? Particularly if those preparations helped protect a young woman who, undoubtedly, would have no other allies?

Llarimar had told him to do his best. That sounded like an awful lot of work. Unfortunately, doing nothing was beginning to seem like even *more* work. Sometimes, when you stepped in something foul, the only thing to do was to stop walking and make the effort to clean it off.

He sighed, shaking his head. "I'm probably going to regret this," he muttered to himself.

Then he went looking for Blushweaver.

The man was slight, almost skeletal, and each shellfish he slurped made Vivenna cringe for two reasons. Not only did she have trouble believing that anyone would enjoy such slimy, sluglike food, but the mussels were also of a very rare and expensive variety.

And she was paying.

The afternoon restaurant crowd was large—people usually ate out at midday, when it made more sense to buy food than return home for a meal. The entire concept of restaurants still seemed strange to her. Didn't these men have wives or servants to make them meals? Didn't they feel uncomfortable eating in such a public place? It was so . . . impersonal.

Denth and Tonk Fah sat on either side of her. And, of course, they helped themselves to the plate of mussels as well. Vivenna wasn't certain—she'd pointedly not asked—but she thought that the shellfish were raw.

The thin man across from her slurped down another one. He didn't seem to be enjoying himself much despite the expensive surroundings and free food. He had a sneer on his lips and while he didn't appear nervous, she did notice that he kept an eye on the restaurant entrance.

"So," Denth said, setting another empty shell on the table, then wiping his fingers on the tablecloth—a common practice in T'Telir. "Can you help us or not?"

The little man—he called himself Fob—shrugged. "You tell a wild tale, mercenary."

"You know me, Fob. When have I lied to you?"

"Whenever you've been paid to do it," Fob said with a snort. "I've just never been able to catch you."

Tonk Fah chuckled, reaching for another mussel. It slipped free of the shell as he brought it to his lips; Vivenna had to steel herself to keep from gagging at the slimy plop it made when it hit the table.

"You don't disagree that war is coming, though," Denth said.

"Of course not," Fob said. "But it's been coming for decades now. What makes you think that it will finally happen this year?"

"Can you afford to ignore the chance that it might?" Denth asked.

Fob squirmed a bit, then began eating mussels again. Tonk Fah began stacking the shells, seeing how many he could get balanced on top of one another. Vivenna said nothing for the moment. Her minor part in the meetings didn't bother her. She watched, she learned, and she thought.

Fob was a landowner. He cleared forests, then rented the land to growers. He often relied on Lifeless to help with his clearing—workers loaned to him through the government. There was only one stipulation upon the lending. Should war come, all of the food produced on his holdings during wartime immediately became the property of the Returned.

It was a good deal. The government would probably seize his lands during a war anyway, so he didn't really lose anything save for his right to complain.

He ate another mussel. *How does he keep packing them down?* she thought. Fob had managed to slurp away nearly twice as many of the disgusting little creatures as Tonk Fah.

"That harvest won't come in, Fob," Denth said. "You will lose quite a bit this year, should we prove right."

"But," Tonk Fah said, adding another shell to his stack, "harvest early, sell your stockpiles, and you stand to get ahead of your competitors."

"And what do you gain?" Fob asked. "How do I know those same competitors haven't hired you to *convince* me a war is coming?"

The table fell silent, making noticeable the other diners clattering at their own meals. Denth finally turned, eyeing Vivenna, and nodded.

She pulled up her shawl—not the matronly one she'd brought from Idris, but a silken, gossamer one that Denth had found for her. She met Fob's eyes, then changed her hair to a deep red. With the shawl up, only those at the table and watching closely would be able to see the change.

He froze. "Do that again," he said.

She changed it to blond.

Fob sat back, letting his mussel fall free of its shell. It splatted against the table near the one Tonk Fah had dropped. "The *queen*?" he asked with shock.

"No," Vivenna said. "Her sister."

"What's going on here?" Fob asked.

Denth smiled. "She's here to organize a resistance against the Returned gods and to prepare Idrian interests here in T'Telir for the coming war."

"You don't think that old royal up in the highlands would send his daughter for nothing?" Tonk Fah said. "War. It's the only thing that would call for such desperation."

"Your sister," Fob said, eyeing Vivenna. "They sent the younger one into the court. Why?"

"The king's plans are his own, Fob," Denth said.

Fob looked thoughtful. Finally, he flipped the fallen mussel onto the plate of shells and reached for a fresh one. "I *knew* there was more behind that girl's arrival than simple chance."

"So you'll harvest?" Denth asked.

"I'll think about it," Fob said.

Denth nodded. "Good enough, I guess."

He nodded to Vivenna and Tonk Fah, and the three of them left Fob eating his shellfish. Vivenna settled the tab—which was even higher than she'd feared—and then they joined Parlin, Jewels, and Clod the Lifeless waiting outside. The group moved away from the restaurant, pushing through the crowd easily, if only because of the massive Lifeless that walked before them.

"Where now?" Vivenna asked.

Denth eyed her. "Not tired even a little?"

Vivenna didn't acknowledge her sore feet or her drowsiness. "We're working for the good of my people, Denth. A little weariness is a small price."

Denth shot a glance toward Tonk Fah, but the overweight mercenary had split off into the crowd toward a merchant's stand, Parlin tagging along behind. Parlin, Vivenna noticed, had gone back to wearing his ridiculous green hat despite her disapproval. What was wrong with that man? He wasn't terribly bright, true, but he had always been levelheaded.

"Jewels," Denth called up ahead. "Take us to the Raymar place."

Jewels nodded, giving instructions to Clod that Vivenna couldn't hear. The group turned in another direction through the crowd.

"It only responds to her?" Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. "It has basic instructions to do what Tonks and I say and I've got a security phrase I can use if I need more control."

Vivenna frowned. "Security phrase?"

Denth eyed her. "This is a rather heretical discussion we're getting into. You sure you want to continue?"

Vivenna ignored the amusement in his tone. "I still do *not* like the idea of that thing being with us, particularly if I don't have any way to control it."

"All Awakening works by way of the Command, Princess," Denth said. "You infuse something with life, then give it an order. Lifeless are valuable because you can give them Commands *after* you create them, unlike regular Awakened objects, which you can only Command once in advance. Plus, Lifeless can remember a long list of complicated orders and are generally good about not misunderstanding them. They retain a bit of their humanity, I guess."

Vivenna shivered. That made them seem far too sentient for her liking.

"However, that means pretty much anyone can control a Lifeless," Denth said. "Not just the person who created them. So we give them security phrases. A couple words you can say that will let you imprint the creature with new Commands."

"So what's the security phrase for Clod?"

"I'll have to ask Jewels if you can have it."

Vivenna opened her mouth to complain, but thought better of it. Denth obviously didn't like interfering with Jewels or her work. Vivenna would simply have to make a point of it later, once they were in a more private location. Instead, she just eyed Clod. He was dressed in simple clothing. Grey trousers and grey shirt, with a leather jerkin that had been drained of color. He carried a large blade at his waist. Not a dueling sword—a more brutal, broad-bladed weapon.

All in grey, Vivenna thought. *Is that because they want everyone to recognize Clod for a Lifeless?* Despite what Denth said about Lifeless being common, many people gave the thing a wide berth. *Snakes might be common in the jungle,* she thought, *but that doesn't mean that people are pleased to see them.*

Jewels chatted quietly at the Lifeless, though it never responded. It simply walked, face forward, inhuman in the steady rhythm of its steps.

"Does she always . . . talk to it like that?" Vivenna asked, shivering.

"Yeah," Denth said.

"That doesn't seem very healthy."

Denth looked troubled, though he said nothing. A few moments later, Tonk Fah and Parlin returned. Tonk Fah, Vivenna was displeased to see,

had a small monkey on his shoulder. It chittered a bit, then ran behind Tonk Fah's neck, moving to the other shoulder.

"A new pet?" Vivenna asked. "What happened to that parrot of yours, anyway?"

Tonk Fah looked ashamed, and Denth just shook his head. "Tonks isn't very good with pets."

"That parrot was boring anyway," Tonk Fah said. "Monkeys are *much* more interesting."

Vivenna shook her head. It wasn't long before they arrived at the next restaurant, one far less lavish than the previous one. Jewels, Parlin, and the Lifeless took up places outside, as usual, and Vivenna and the two male mercenaries walked in.

The meetings were becoming routine. During the last couple of weeks, they'd met with at least a dozen people of varying usefulness. Some were underground leaders Denth thought might be capable of making a ruckus. Others were merchants, like Fob. All in all, Vivenna was impressed with the variety of covert ways Denth had come up with to disrupt things in T'Telir.

Most of the schemes did, however, require a display of Vivenna's Royal Locks as a clincher. Most people instantly grasped the importance of a royal daughter being in the city, and she was left wondering just how Lemex had intended to achieve results without such convincing proof.

Denth led them to a table in the corner, and Vivenna frowned at how dirty the restaurant was. The only light came in the form of slim slatlike windows shining beams of sunlight through the ceiling, but even that was enough to show the grime. Despite her hunger, she quickly determined that she would not be eating anything at *this* establishment. "Why do we keep switching restaurants, anyway?" she said, sitting down—but only after wiping off the stool with her handkerchief.

"Harder to spy on us that way," Denth said. "I keep warning you, Princess. This is more dangerous than it seems. Don't let the simple meetings over food throw you off. In any other city, we'd be meeting in lairs, gambling parlors, or alleyways. Best to keep moving."

They settled down, and as if they hadn't just come from their second lunch of the day, Denth and Tonk Fah ordered food. Vivenna sat quietly in her chair, preparing for the meeting. Gods Feast was something of a holy day in Hallandren—though, from what she'd seen, the people of the pagan city

had no real concept of what a "holy day" should be. Instead of helping the monks in their fields or caring for the needy, the people took the evening off and splurged on meals—as if the gods wanted them to be extravagant.

And perhaps they did. From what she'd heard, the Returned were prolifigate beings. It made sense for their followers to spend their "holy day" being idle and gluttonous.

Their contact arrived before the food did. He walked in with two bodyguards of his own. He wore nice clothing—which meant bright clothing, in T'Telir—but his beard was long and greasy, and he appeared to be short several teeth. He pointed, and his bodyguards pulled a second table over next to Vivenna's, then arranged three chairs by it. The man took a seat, careful to keep his distance from Denth and Tonk Fah.

"A little paranoid, aren't we?" Denth said.

The man raised his hands. "Caution never hurt a man."

"More food for us, then," Tonk Fah said as the plate arrived. It was covered with bits of . . . something that had been battered and fried. The monkey immediately scrambled down Tonk Fah's arm and snatched a few pieces.

"So," the man said, "you're the infamous Denth."

"I am. I assume you're Grable?"

The man nodded.

One of the city's less reputable thieving lords, Vivenna thought. *A strong ally of Vahr's rebellion.* They had been waiting weeks to set up this meeting.

"Good," Denth said. "We have some interest in making certain supply carts disappear on the way to the city." He said it so openly. Vivenna glanced about, making certain no other tables were close.

"Grable owns this restaurant, Princess," Tonk Fah whispered. "Every second man in this room is probably a bodyguard."

Great, she thought, annoyed they hadn't told her before they entered. She glanced around again, feeling far more jumpy this time.

"Is that so?" Grable asked, bringing Vivenna's attention back to the conversation. "You want to make things disappear? Caravans of food?"

"It's a difficult job we're asking for," Denth said grimly. "These aren't long-distance caravans. Most of them will simply be coming into the city from the outlying farms." He nodded to Vivenna, and she pulled out a small pouch of coins. She handed them to him, and he tossed them to a nearby table.

One of the bodyguards investigated.

"For your trouble in coming today," Denth said.

Vivenna watched the money go with a crimp in her stomach. It felt downright *wrong* to be using royal funds to bribe men like Grable. What she had just given away wasn't even a real bribe—it was simply "grease money," as Denth put it.

"Now," Denth said, "the carts we're talking about—"

"Wait," Grable said. "Let's see the hair first."

Vivenna sighed, moving to put up the shawl.

"No shawl," Grable said. "No tricks. The men in this room are loyal."

Vivenna shot a glance at Denth, and he nodded. So she shifted colors a couple of times. Grable watched intently, scratching at his beard.

"Nice," he finally said. "Nice indeed. Where'd you find her?"

Denth frowned. "What?"

"A person with enough royal blood to imitate one of the princesses."

"She's no impostor," Denth said as Tonk Fah continued to work on the plate of fried somethings.

"Come now," Grable said, smiling with a wide, uneven smile. "You can tell me."

"It's true," Vivenna said. "Being royal is about more than just blood. It's about lineage and the holy calling of Austre. My children will not have the Royal Locks unless I become queen of Idris. Only potential heirs have the ability to change their hair color."

"Superstitious nonsense," Grable said. He leaned forward, ignoring her and focusing on Denth. "I don't care about your caravans, Denth. I want to buy the girl from you. How much?"

Denth was silent.

"Word of her is spreading about town," Grable said. "I see what you're doing. You could move a lot of people, make a lot of noise, with a person who seemed to be of the royal family. I don't know where you found her, or how you trained her so well, but I want her."

Denth stood up slowly. "We're leaving," he said. Grable's bodyguards stood up too.

Denth moved.

There were flashes—reflections of sunlight, and bodies moving too fast for Vivenna's shocked mind to follow. Then the motion stopped. Grable remained

in his chair. Denth stood poised, his dueling blade sticking through the neck of one of the bodyguards.

The bodyguard looked surprised, his hand still on his sword. Vivenna hadn't even seen Denth draw his weapon. The other bodyguard stumbled, blood staining the front of his jerkin from where—shockingly—Denth seemed to have managed to stab him as well.

He slipped to the ground, bumping Grable's table in his death throes.

Lord of Colors . . . Vivenna thought. *So fast!*

"So, you *are* as good as they say," Grable said, still looking unconcerned. Around the room, other men had stood. Some twenty of them. Tonk Fah grabbed another handful of fried things, then nudged Vivenna. "We might want to get up," he whispered.

Denth pulled his sword free of the bodyguard's neck, and the man joined his friend, bleeding and dying on the floor. Denth slammed his sword into its sheath without wiping it, never breaking Grable's gaze.

"People speak of you," Grable said. "Say you appeared out of nowhere a decade or so back. Gathered yourself a team of the best—stole them from important men. Or important prisons. Nobody knows much about you, other than the fact that you're fast. Some say inhumanly so."

Denth nodded toward the doorway. Vivenna stood nervously, then let Tonk Fah pull her through the room. The guards stood with their hands on their swords, but nobody attacked.

"It's a pity we couldn't do business," Grable said, sighing. "I hope you'll think of me for future dealings."

Denth finally turned away, joining Vivenna and Tonk Fah as they left the restaurant and moved out onto the sunny street. Parlin and Jewels hurried to catch up.

"He's letting us go?" Vivenna asked, heart thumping.

"He just wanted to see my blade," Denth said. He still seemed tense. "It happens sometimes."

"Barring that, he wanted to steal himself a princess," Tonk Fah added. "He either got to verify Denth's skill or he got you."

"But . . . you could have killed him!" Vivenna said.

Tonk Fah snorted. "And bring down the wrath of half the thieves, assassins, and burglars in the city? No, Grable knew he wasn't ever in any danger from us."

Denth looked back at her. "I'm sorry for wasting your time—I thought he'd be more useful."

She frowned, noting for the first time the careful mask that Denth kept on his emotions. She'd always thought of him as carefree, like Tonk Fah, but now she saw hints of something else. Control. Control that was, for the first time since they'd met, in danger of cracking.

"Well, no harm done," she said.

"Except for those slobs that Denth poked," Tonk Fah added, happily feeding another morsel to his monkey.

"We need to—"

"Princess?" a voice asked from the crowd.

Denth and Tonk Fah both spun. Once again, Denth's sword was out before Vivenna could track. This time, however, he didn't strike. The man behind them didn't seem much of a threat. He wore ragged brown clothing, and had a leathery suntanned face. He had the look of a farmer.

"Oh, Princess," the man said, hurrying forward, ignoring the blades. "It is you. I heard rumors, but . . . oh, you're here!"

Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, and the larger mercenary reached out, putting a hand in front of the newcomer before he got too close to Vivenna. She would have thought the caution unnecessary had she just not seen Denth kill two men in an eyeblink. The danger Denth always talked about was slowly seeping into her mind. If this man had a hidden weapon and a little skill, he could kill her before she knew what was happening.

It was a chilling realization.

"Princess," the man said, falling to his knees. "I am your servant."

"Please," she said. "Do not put me above others."

"Oh," the man said, looking up. "I'm sorry. It's been so long since I left Idris! But, it *is* you!"

"How did you know I was here?"

"The Idrians in T'Telir," the man said. "They say you've come to take the throne back. We've been oppressed here for so long that I thought people were just making up stories. But it's true! You're here!"

Denth glanced at her, then at Grable's restaurant, which was still close behind them. He nodded to Tonk Fah. "Grab him, search him, and we'll talk somewhere else."

THE "SOMEWHERE ELSE" TURNED OUT to be a ragged dump of a building in a poor section of town about a fifteen minutes from the restaurant.

Vivenna found the slums of T'Telir to be very interesting, on an intellectual level at least. Even here, there was color. People wore faded clothing. Bright strips of cloth hung from windows, stretched across overhangs, and even sat in puddles on the street. Colors, muted or dirty. Like a carnival that had been hit by a mudslide.

Vivenna stood outside the shack with Jewels, Parlin, and the Idrian, waiting as Denth and Tonk Fah made sure the building wasn't hiding any unseen threats. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling an odd sense of despair. The faded colors in the alley felt wrong. They were dead things. Like a beautiful bird that had fallen motionless to the ground, its shape intact, but the magic gone.

Ruined reds, stained yellows, broken greens. In T'Telir, even simple things—like chair legs and storage sacks—were dyed bright colors. How much must the people of the city spend on dyes and inks? If it hadn't been for the Tears of Edgli, the vibrant flowers that grew only in the T'Telir climate, it would have been impossible. Hallandren had made an entire economy out of growing, harvesting, and producing dyes from the special flowers.

Vivenna wrinkled her nose at the smell of refuse. Scents were more vibrant to her now, too, much like colors. It wasn't that her ability to smell was any better, the things that she smelled just seemed rich. She shivered. Even now, weeks after the infusion of Breath, she didn't feel normal. She could *sense* the teeming people of the city, could sense Parlin beside her, watching the nearby alleys with suspicion. She could sense Denth and Tonk Fah inside—one of them appeared to be inspecting the basement.

She could . . .

She froze. She *couldn't* feel Jewels. She glanced to the side, but the shorter woman was there, hands on hips, muttering to herself about being left with the "kids." Her Lifeless abomination was beside her; Vivenna hadn't expected to be able to feel it. Why couldn't she feel Jewels? Vivenna had a sharp moment of panic, thinking that Jewels might be some twisted Lifeless creation. Then, however, she realized that there was a simple explanation.

Jewels had no Breath. She was a Drab.

Now that Vivenna knew what to look for, it was obvious. Even without her wealth of Breath, Vivenna thought she might have been able to tell. There was less of a sparkle of life in Jewels's eyes. She seemed more grumpy, less pleasant. She seemed to put others on edge.

Plus Jewels never noticed when Vivenna was watching her. Whatever sense made others glance about if they were watched for too long, Jewels didn't have it. Vivenna turned away, and found herself blushing. Seeing a person without Breath . . . it felt like spying on someone when they were changing. Seeing them exposed.

Poor woman, she thought. *I wonder how it happened.* Had she sold it herself? Or had it been taken from her? Suddenly, Vivenna felt awkward. *Why should I have so much, when she has nothing?* It was the worst kind of ostentation.

She felt Denth approach before he actually pushed the door open. It looked ready to fall off its hinges. "Safe," he said. Then he eyed Vivenna. "You don't have to be involved with this, if you don't want to waste your time, Princess. Jewels can take you back to the house. We'll question the man and bring you word."

She shook her head. "No. I want to hear what he has to say."

"I figured as much," Denth said. "We'll want to cancel our next appointment, though. Jewels, you—"

"I'll do it," Parlin said.

Denth paused, glancing at Vivenna.

"Look, I may not understand everything going on in this city," Parlin said, "but I can deliver a simple message. I'm not an idiot."

"Let him go," Vivenna said. "I trust him."

Denth shrugged. "All right. Head straight down this alley until you find the square with the broken statue of a horseman, then turn east and follow that road through its curves. That'll take you out of the slum. The next appointment was to happen at a restaurant called the Armsman's Way; you'll find it in the market on the west side."

Parlin nodded and took off. Denth waved for Vivenna and the others to enter the building. The nervous Idrian man—Thame—went first. Vivenna followed him in, and was surprised to find that the inside of the building looked quite a bit sturdier than the outside had indicated. Tonk Fah found a stool, and he put it down in the center of the room.

"Have a seat, friend," Denth said, gesturing.

Thame nervously settled on the stool.

"Now," Denth said, "why don't you tell us how you found out that the princess was going to be in that particular restaurant today?"

Thame glanced from side to side. "I just happened to be walking in the area and I—"

Tonk Fah cracked his knuckles. Vivenna glanced at him, suddenly noticing that Tonk Fah seemed more . . . dangerous. The idle, overweight man who liked to nap had vanished. In his place was a thug with sleeves rolled up, showing off muscles that bulged impressively.

Thame was sweating. To the side, Clod the Lifeless stepped into the room, his inhuman eyes falling into shadow, his face looking like something molded in wax. A simulacrum of a human.

"I . . . run jobs for one of the bosses in the city," Thame said. "Little things. Nothing big. When you're one of us, you take the jobs you can get."

"One of us?" Denth asked, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Idrian."

"I've seen Idrians in good positions in the city, friend," Denth said. "Merchants. Moneylenders."

"The lucky ones, sir," Thame said, gulping. "They have their own money. People will work with anyone who has money. If you're just an ordinary man, things are different. People look at your clothing, listen to your accent, and they find others to do their work. They say we're not trustworthy. Or that we're boring. Or that we steal."

"And do you?" Vivenna found herself asking.

Thame looked at her, then glanced down at the building's dirt floor. "Sometimes," he said. "But not at first. I only do it now, when my boss asks me to."

"That still doesn't answer how you knew where to find us, friend," Denth said quietly. His pointed use of the word "friend," when contrasted with Tonk Fah on one side and the Lifeless on the other, made Vivenna shiver.

"My boss talks too much," Thame said. "He knew what was happening at that restaurant—he sold the information to a couple of people. I heard for free."

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah.

"Everyone knows she's in the city," Thame said quickly. "We've all heard

the rumors. It's no coincidence. Things are bad for us. Worse than they've ever been. The princess came to help, right?"

"Friend," Denth said. "I think it's best that you forget this entire meeting. I realize that there will be the temptation to sell information. But I promise you, we can find out if you do that. And we can—"

"Denth, that's enough," Vivenna said. "Stop scaring the man."

The mercenary glanced at her, causing Thame to jump.

"Oh, for the Colors' sake," she said walking forward, crouching beside Thame's stool. "No harm will come to you, Thame. You have done well in seeking me out, and I trust you to keep news of our meeting quiet. But, tell me, if things are so bad in T'Telir, why not return to Idris?"

"Travel costs money, Your Highness," he said. "I can't afford it—most of us can't."

"Are there many of you here?" Vivenna asked.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Vivenna nodded. "I want to meet with the others."

"Princess—" Denth said, but she silenced him with a glance.

"I can gather some together," Thame said, nodding eagerly. "I promise. I'm known to a lot of the Idrians."

"Good," Vivenna said. "Because I *have* come to help. How shall we contact you?"

"Ask around for Rira," he said. "That's my boss."

Vivenna rose and then gestured toward the doorway. Thame fled without further prompting. Jewels, who stood guarding the doorway, reluctantly stepped aside and let the man scuttle away.

The room was silent for a moment.

"Jewels," Denth said. "Follow him."

She nodded and was gone.

Vivenna glanced back at the two mercenaries, expecting to find them angry at her.

"Aw, did you have to let him go so fast?" Tonk Fah said, sitting down on the floor, looking morose. Whatever he'd done to look dangerous was gone, evaporating faster than water on metal in the sun.

"Now you've done it," Denth said. "He'll be sullen for the rest of the day."

"I *never* get to be the bad guy anymore," Tonk Fah said, falling back and

staring up at the ceiling. His monkey wandered over and sat atop his ample stomach.

"You'll get over it," Vivenna said, rolling her eyes. "Why were you so hard on him, anyway?"

Denth shrugged. "You know what I like least about being a mercenary?"

"I suspect that you're going to tell me," Vivenna said, folding her arms.

"People are always trying to fool you," he said, sitting down on the floor beside Tonk Fah. "They all think that because you're hired muscle, you're an idiot."

He paused, as if expecting Tonk Fah to give his usual counterpoint. Instead, however, the bulky mercenary just continued to stare at the ceiling. "Arsteel *always* got to be the mean one," he said.

Denth sighed, giving Vivenna a "This is your fault" look. "Anyway," he continued. "I couldn't be sure that our friend there wasn't a plant arranged by Grable. He could have pretended to be a loyal subject, gotten inside our defenses, then knifed you in the back. Best to be safe."

She sat down on the stool, and was tempted to say that he was overreacting, but . . . well, she had just seen him kill two men in her defense. *I'm paying them,* she thought. *I should probably just let them do their job.* "Tonk Fah," she said. "You can be the mean one next time."

He looked up. "You promise?"

"Yes," she said.

"Can I yell at the person we are interrogating?"

"Sure," she said.

"Can I growl at him?" he asked.

"I guess," she said.

"Can I break his fingers?"

She frowned. "No!"

"Not even the unimportant ones?" Tonk Fah asked. "I mean, people have *five* after all. The little ones don't even do that much."

Vivenna paused, then Tonk Fah and Denth started laughing.

"Oh, honestly," she said, turning away. "I can never tell when you shift from being serious to being ridiculous."

"That's what makes it so funny," Tonk Fah said, still chuckling.

"Are we leaving, then?" Vivenna said, rising.

"Nah," Denth said. "Let's wait a bit. I'm still not sure that Grable isn't looking for us. Best to lay low for a few hours."

She frowned, glancing at Denth. Tonk Fah, amazingly, was already snoring softly.

"I thought you said that Grable would let us go," she said. "That he was just testing us—that he wanted to see how good you were."

"It's likely," Denth said. "But I've been known to be wrong. He might have let us go because he was worried about my sword being so close to him. He could be having second thoughts. We'll give it a few hours, then head back and ask my watchers if anyone has been poking around the house."

"Watchers?" Vivenna asked. "You have people watching our house?"

"Of course," Denth said. "Kids work cheap in the city. Worth the coin, even when you're not protecting a princess from a rival kingdom."

She folded her arms, standing. She didn't feel like sitting, so she began to pace.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Grable," Denth said, eyes closed as he sat back, leaning against the wall. "This is just a precaution."

She shook her head. "It makes sense that he'd want revenge, Denth," she said. "You killed two of his men."

"Men can be cheap in this city too, Princess."

"You say he was testing you," Vivenna said. "But what would be the point of that? Provoking you to action just to let you go?"

"To see how much of a threat I was," Denth said, shrugging, eyes still closed. "Or, more likely, to see if I was worth the pay I usually demand. Again, I wouldn't worry so much."

She sighed, then wandered over to the window so she could watch the street.

"You should probably stay away from the window," Denth said. "Just to be safe."

First he tells me not to worry, then he tells me not to let myself be seen, she thought with frustration, walking toward the back of the room, moving toward the door down to the cellar.

"I wouldn't do that, either," Denth noted. "Stairs are broken in a few places. Not much to see, anyway. Dirt floor. Dirt walls. Dirt ceiling."

She sighed again, turning away from the door.

"What is with you, anyway?" he asked, still not opening his eyes. "You're not usually this nervous."

"I don't know," she said. "Being locked in like this makes me anxious."

"I thought princesses were taught to be patient," Denth noted.

He's right, she realized. *That sounded like something Siri would say. What* is *wrong with me lately?* She forced herself to sit down on the stool, folding her hands in her lap, reasserting control of her hair, which had rebelliously started to lighten to a brown. "Please," she said, forcing herself to sound patient, "tell me of this place. Why did you select this building?"

Denth cracked an eyelid. "We rent it," he finally said. "It's nice to have safe houses around the city. Since we don't use them very often, we find the cheapest ones we can."

I noticed, Vivenna thought, but fell silent, recognizing how stilted her attempt at conversation had sounded. She sat quietly, looking down at her hands, trying to figure out just what had set her on edge.

It was more than the fight. The truth was, she was worried about how long things in T'Telir were taking. Her father would have received her letter two weeks before and would know that *two* of his daughters were in Hallandren. She could only hope that the logic of her letter, mixed with her threats, would keep him from doing anything foolish.

She was glad Denth had made her abandon Lemex's house. If her father did send agents to retrieve her, they would naturally try to find Lemex first—just as she had. However, a cowardly part of her wished that Denth hadn't shown such foresight. If they were still living in Lemex's home, she might have been discovered already. And be on her way back to Idris.

She acted so determined. Indeed, sometimes she *felt* quite determined. Those were the times when she thought about Siri or her kingdom's needs. However, those times—the royal times—were actually rather rare. The rest of the time, she wondered.

What was she doing? She didn't know about subterfuge or warfare. Denth was really behind everything she was "doing" to help Idris. What she had suspected on that first day had proved true. Her preparation and study amounted to little. She didn't know how to go about saving Siri. She didn't know what to do about the Breath she held within her. She didn't even know, really, if she wanted to stay in this insane, overcrowded, over*colored* city.

In short, she was useless. And that was the one thing, above all else, that her training had never prepared her to deal with.

"You really want to meet with the Idrians?" Denth asked. Vivenna looked up. Outside, it was growing darker as evening approached.

Do I? she thought. *If my father has agents in the city, they might be there. But, if there's something I can do for those people . . .*

"I'd like to," she said.

He fell silent.

"You don't like it," she said.

He shook his head. "It will be hard to arrange, hard to keep quiet, and will make you hard to protect. These meetings we've been having—they've all been in controlled areas. If you meet with the common folk, that won't be possible."

She nodded quietly. "I want to do it anyway. I have to do something, Denth. Something useful. Being paraded before these contacts of yours is helping. But I need to do more. If war is coming, we need to prepare these people. Help them, somehow."

She looked up, staring out toward the windows. Clod the Lifeless stood in the corner where Jewels had left him. Vivenna shivered, looking away. "I want to help my sister," she said. "And I want to be useful to my people. But I can't help feeling that I'm not doing much for Idris by staying in the city."

"Better than leaving," Denth said.

"Why?

"Because if you left, there wouldn't be anyone to pay me."

She rolled her eyes.

"I wasn't joking," Denth noted. "I really do like getting paid. However, there are better reasons to stay."

"Like what?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Depends, I guess. Look, Princess, I'm not the type to give brilliant advice or deep counsel. I'm a mercenary. You pay me, you point me, and I go stab things. But I figure that if you think about it, you'll find that running back to Idris is about the *least* useful thing you could do. You won't be able to do anything there other than sit about and knit doilies. Your father has other heirs. Here, you might be largely ineffective—but there you're completely redundant."

He fell silent, stretching, leaning back a little more. *Tough man to have a*

conversation with, sometimes, Vivenna thought to herself, shaking her head. Still, she found his words comforting. She smiled, turning.

And found Clod standing right beside her stool.

She yelped, half-scrambling, half-falling backward. Denth was on his feet in a heartbeat, sword drawn, and Tonk Fah wasn't far behind.

Vivenna stumbled to her feet, her skirts getting in the way, and placed a hand against her chest, as if to still her heartbeat. The Lifeless stood, watching her.

"He does that sometimes," Denth said, chuckling, though it sounded false to Vivenna. "Just walks up to people."

"Like he was curious about them," Tonk Fah said.

"They *can't* be curious," Denth said. "No emotion at all. Clod. Go back to your corner."

The Lifeless turned and began to walk.

"No," Vivenna said, shivering. "Put it in the basement."

"But, the stairs—" Denth said.

"*Now!*" Vivenna snapped, hair tingeing red at the tips.

Denth sighed. "Clod, to the cellar."

The Lifeless turned and walked to the door at the back. As he went down the steps, Vivenna heard one crack slightly, but the creature made it safely, judging by the sound of his footsteps. She sat back down, trying to calm her breathing.

"Sorry about that," Denth said.

"I can't feel him," Vivenna said. "It's unnerving. I forget that he's there, and don't notice when he approaches."

Denth nodded. "I know."

"Jewels, too," she said, glancing at him. "She is a Drab."

"Yeah," Denth said, settling back down. "Has been since she was a child. Her parents sold her Breath to one of the gods."

"They each need a Breath a week to survive," Tonk Fah added.

"How horrible," Vivenna said. *I really need to show her more kindness.*

"It's really not so bad," Denth said. "I've been without Breath myself."

"You have?"

He nodded. "Everyone goes through times when they're short of coin. The nice thing about Breath is that you can always buy one off someone else."

"Somebody is always selling," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna shook her head, shivering. "But you have to live without it for a time. Have no soul."

Denth laughed—and this time it was definitely genuine. "Oh, that's just superstition, Princess. Lacking Breath doesn't change you that much."

"It makes you less kind," Vivenna said. "More irritable. Like . . ."

"Jewels?" Denth asked, amused. "Nah, she'd be like that anyway. I'm sure of it. Either way, when I've sold my Breath, I didn't feel much different. You really have to pay attention to even notice it's missing."

Vivenna turned away. She didn't expect him to understand. It was easy to call her beliefs superstition, but she could just as easily turn the words back on Denth. People saw what they wanted to see. If he believed he felt the same without Breath, that was just an easy way to rationalize the selling of it—and then purchase of another Breath from an innocent person. Besides, why even bother buying one back if it didn't matter?

The conversation died off until Jewels returned. She walked in and, once again, Vivenna barely noticed her. *I'm starting to rely on that life sense far too much,* she thought with annoyance, standing as Jewels nodded to Denth.

"He is who he says he is," Jewels said. "I asked around, got three confirmations from people I kind of trust."

"All right, then," Denth said, stretching and climbing to his feet. He kicked Tonk Fah awake. "Let's *carefully* head back to the house."

23

Lightsong found Blushweaver in the grassy portion of the courtyard behind her palace. She was enjoying the art of one of the city's master gardeners.

Lightsong strolled through the grass, his entourage hovering around him, holding up a large parasol to shield him from the sun, and generally seeing that he was suitably pampered. He passed hundreds of planters, pots, and vases filled with various kinds of growing things, all arranged into elaborate formal patterns and rows.

Temporary flower beds. The gods were too godly to leave the court and visit the city gardens, so the gardens had to be brought to them. Such an enormous undertaking required dozens of workers and carts full of plants. Nothing was too good for the gods.

Except, of course, freedom.

Blushweaver stood admiring one of the patterns of vases. She noticed Lightsong as he approached, his moving BioChroma successively making the flowers shine more vibrantly in the afternoon sunlight. She was wearing a surprisingly modest dress. It had no sleeves and appeared to be made entirely of a single wrapping of green silk, but it covered up the essential bits and then some.

"Lightsong, dear," she said, smiling. "Visiting a lady in her home? How charmingly forward. Well, enough of this small talk. Let us retire to the bedroom."

He smiled, holding up a sheet of paper as he approached her.

She paused, then accepted it. The front was covered with colored dots—the artisans' script. "What is this?" she asked.

"I figured I knew how our conversation would begin," he said. "And so I saved us the trouble of having to go through it. I had it written out beforehand."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, then read. " 'To start, Blushweaver says something that is mildly suggestive.' " She glanced at him. "Mildly? I invited you to the bedroom. I'd call that blatant."

"I underestimated you," Lightsong said. "Please continue."

" 'Then Lightsong says something to deflect her,' " Blushweaver read. " 'It is so incredibly charming and clever that she is left stunned by his brilliance and cannot speak for several minutes . . .' Oh, honestly, Lightsong. Do I have to read this?"

"It's a masterpiece," he said. "Best work I've ever done. Please, the next part is important."

She sighed. " 'Blushweaver says something about politics which is dreadfully boring but she offsets it by wiggling her chest. After that, Lightsong apologizes for being so distant lately. He explains that he had some things to work out.' " She paused, eyeing him. "Does this mean that you're finally ready to be part of my plans?"

He nodded. To the side, a group of gardeners removed the flowers. They returned in waves, building a pattern of small blossoming trees in large pots around Blushweaver and Lightsong, a living kaleidoscope with the two Returned gods at its center.

"I don't think that the queen is involved in a plot to take the throne," Lightsong said. "Although I've spoken with her only briefly, I am convinced."

"Then why agree to join with me?"

He stood quietly for a moment, enjoying the blossoms. "Because," he said. "I intend to see that you don't crush her. Or the rest of us."

"My dear Lightsong," Blushweaver said, pursing bright red lips. "I assure you that I'm harmless."

He raised an eyebrow. "I doubt that."

"Now, now," she said, "you should never point out a lady's departure from strict truth. Anyway, I'm glad you came. We have work to do."

"Work?" he said. "That sounds like . . . work."

"Of course, dear," she said, walking away. Gardeners immediately ran

forward, pulling aside the small trees to clear a path for them. The master gardener himself stood by directing the evolving composition like the conductor of a botanical orchestra.

Lightsong hurried and caught up. "Work," he said. "Do you know what my philosophy on that word is?"

"I have somehow gotten the subtle impression that you do not approve of it," Blushweaver said.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Work, my dear Blushweaver, is like fertilizer."

"It smells?"

He smiled. "No, I was thinking that work is like fertilizer in that I'm glad it exists; I just don't ever want to get stuck in it."

"That's unfortunate," Blushweaver said. "Because you just agreed to do so."

He sighed. "I thought I smelled something."

"Don't be tedious," she said, smiling to some workers as they lined her path with vases of flowers. "This is going to be fun." She turned back to him, eyes twinkling. "Mercystar got attacked last night."

"OH, MY DEAR BLUSHWEAVER. It was positively *tragic*."

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. Mercystar was a gorgeously voluptuous woman who offered a striking contrast with Blushweaver. Both were, of course, perfect examples of feminine beauty. Blushweaver was simply the slim—yet busty—type while Mercystar was the curvaceous—yet busty—type. Mercystar lounged back on a plush couch, being fanned with large palm leaves by several of her serving men.

She didn't have Blushweaver's subtle sense of style. There was a skill to choosing bright clothing that didn't edge into garishness. Lightsong himself didn't have it—but he had servants who did. Mercystar, apparently, didn't even know such a skill existed.

Though admittedly, he thought, *orange and gold aren't exactly the easiest colors to wear with dignity.*

"Mercystar, dear," Blushweaver said warmly. One of the servants provided a cushioned stool, sliding it beneath Blushweaver just as she sat at Mercystar's elbow. "I can understand how you must feel."

"Can you?" Mercystar asked. "Can you possibly? This is terrible. Some . . . some *miscreant* snuck into my palace, accosting my servants! The very home of a goddess! Who would do such a thing?"

"Indeed, he must have been deranged," Blushweaver said soothingly. Lightsong stood beside her, smiling sympathetically, hands clasped behind his back. A cool afternoon breeze blew across the courtyard and through the pavilion. Some of Blushweaver's gardeners had brought over flowers and trees, surrounding the pavilion's canopy, filling the air with their mingled perfumes.

"I can't understand it," Mercystar said. "The guards at the gates are supposed to prevent these kinds of things! Why do we have walls if people can just walk in and violate our homes? I just don't feel safe anymore."

"I'm certain the guards will be more diligent in the future," Blushweaver said.

Lightsong frowned, glancing toward Mercystar's palace, where servants buzzed about like bees around a disturbed hive. "What was the intruder after, do you suppose?" he said, almost to himself. "Works of art, perhaps? Surely there are merchants who would be much easier to rob."

"We may not know what they want," Blushweaver said smoothly, "but we at least know *something* about them."

"We do?" Mercystar said, perking up.

"Yes, dear," Blushweaver said. "Only someone with no respect for tradition, propriety, or religion would dare trespass in the home of a god. Someone base. Disrespectful. Unbelieving . . ."

"An Idrian?" Mercystar asked.

"Did you ever wonder, dear," Blushweaver said, "why they sent their *youngest* daughter to the God King instead of their eldest?"

Mercystar frowned. "They did?"

"Yes, dear," Blushweaver said.

"That is rather suspicious, now, isn't it?"

"Something is going on in the Court of Gods, Mercystar," Blushweaver said, leaning over. "These could be dangerous times for the Crown."

"Blushweaver," Lightsong said. "A word, if you please?"

She eyed him in annoyance. He met her gaze steadily, which eventually caused her to sigh. She patted Mercystar's hand and then retreated from the pavilion with Lightsong, their servants and priests trailing behind.

"What are you doing?" Lightsong said as soon as they were out of Mercystar's hearing.

"Recruiting," Blushweaver said, a glint in her eye. "We're going to need her Lifeless Commands."

"I'm still not myself persuaded that we will need them," Lightsong said. "War may not be necessary."

"As I said," Blushweaver replied, "we need to be careful. I'm just making preparations."

"All right," he said. There was a wisdom to that. "But we don't know that it was an Idrian who broke into Mercystar's palace. Why are you implying that it was?"

"And you think it's just coincidence? Someone sneaks into one of our palaces *now,* with the war approaching?"

"Coincidence."

"And the intruder just *happened* to pick one of the four Returned who hold Lifeless access Commands? If I were going to go to war with Hallandren, the first thing I'd do would be try to search out those commands. Maybe see if they were written down anywhere, or perhaps try to kill the gods who held them."

Lightsong glanced back at the palace. Blushweaver's arguments held some merit, but they weren't enough. He had an odd impulse to look into this more deeply. However, that sounded like work. He really couldn't afford to make an exception to his usual habits, particularly without a lot of complaining first. It set a poor precedent. So he just nodded his head, and Blushweaver led them back to the pavilion.

"Dear," Blushweaver said, quickly sitting back beside Mercystar and looking a little bit more anxious. She leaned in. "We've talked it over and decided to trust you."

Mercystar sat up. "Trust me? With what?"

"Knowledge," Blushweaver whispered. "There are those of us who fear that the Idrians aren't content with their mountains and are determined to control the lowlands as well."

"But we'll be joined by blood," Mercystar said. "There will be a Hallandren God King with royal blood on our throne."

"Oh?" Blushweaver said. "And could that not also be interpreted as an *Idrian* king with Hallandren blood on the throne?"

Mercystar wavered. Then, oddly, she glanced at Lightsong. "Do you believe this?"

Why did people look toward him? He did everything to discourage such behavior, but they still tended to act like he was some kind of moral authority. "I think that some . . . preparation would be wise," he said. "Though, of course, the same can be said for dinner."

Blushweaver gave him an annoyed look, though by the time she looked back at Mercystar, she had her consoling face on again. "We understand that you've had a difficult day," she said. "But please, consider our offer. We would like you to join with us in our precautions."

"What kind of precautions are you talking about?" Mercystar asked.

"Simple ones," Blushweaver said quickly. "Thinking, talking, planning. Eventually, if we think we have enough evidence, we will bring what we know to the God King."

This seemed to ease Mercystar's mind. She nodded. "Yes, I can see. Preparation. It *would* be wise."

"Rest now, dear," Blushweaver said, rising and leading Lightsong away from the pavilion. They walked leisurely across the perfect lawn back toward Blushweaver's own palace. He felt a reluctance to go, however. Something about the meeting bothered him.

"She's a dear," Blushweaver said, smiling.

"You just say that because she's so easy to manipulate."

"Of course," Blushweaver said. "I positively *love* people who do as they should. 'Should' being defined as whatever I think is best."

"At least you're open about it," Lightsong said.

"To you, my dear, I'm as easy to read as a book."

He snorted. "Maybe one that hasn't been translated to Hallandren yet."

"You just say that because you've never *really* tried reading me," she said, smiling at him. "Though, I must say that there is one thing about dear Mercystar that positively annoys me."

"And that is?"

"Her armies," Blushweaver said, folding her arms. "Why did *she,* goddess of kindness, get command of ten thousand Lifeless? It's obviously a dire error in judgment. Particularly since I don't have command of *any* troops."

"Blushweaver," he said with amusement, "you're the goddess of honesty,

communication, and interpersonal relationships. Why in the world would you be given stewardship of armies?"

"There are many interpersonal relationships related to armies," she said. "After all, what do you call one man hitting another with a sword? That's interpersonal."

"Quite so," Lightsong said, glancing back at Mercystar's pavilion.

"Now," Blushweaver said, "I should think that you'd appreciate my arguments, since relationships are, in fact, war. As is clear in *our* relationship, dear Lightsong. We . . ." She trailed off, then poked him in the shoulder. "Lightsong? Pay attention to me!"

"Yes?"

She folded her arms petulantly. "I must say, your banter has been decidedly off today. I may just have to find someone else to play with."

"Hum, yes," he said, studying Mercystar's palace. "Tragic. Now, the break-in at Mercystar's. It was just one person?"

"Supposedly," Blushweaver said. "It's not important."

"Was anyone injured?"

"A couple of servants," Blushweaver said with a wave of the hand. "One was found dead, I believe. You should be paying attention to *me,* not that—"

Lightsong froze. "Someone was *killed*?"

She shrugged. "So they say."

He turned around. "I'm going to go back and talk to her some more."

"Fine," Blushweaver snapped. "But you'll do it without me. I have gardens to enjoy."

"All right," Lightsong said, already turning away. "I'll talk to you later."

Blushweaver let out a huff of indignation, her hands on her hips, watching him go. Lightsong ignored her irritation, however, more focused on . . .

What? So some servants had been hurt. It wasn't his place to be involved in criminal disturbances. And yet, he walked straight to Mercystar's pavilion again, his servants and priests trailing behind, as ever.

She was still reclining on her couch. "Lightsong?" she asked with a frown.

"I returned because I just heard that one of your servants was killed in the attack."

"Ah, yes," she said. "The poor man. What a terrible occurrence. I'm sure he's found his blessings in heaven."

"Funny, how they're always in the last place you consider looking," Lightsong said. "Tell me, how did the murder happen?"

"It's very odd, actually," she said. "The two guards at the door were knocked unconscious. The intruder was discovered by four of my servants who were walking through the service hallway. He fought them, knocked out one, killed another, and two escaped."

"How was the man killed?"

Mercystar sighed. "I really don't know," she said with a wave of the hand. "My priests can tell you. I fear I was too traumatized to take in the details."

"It would be all right if I talked to them?"

"If you must," Mercystar said. "Have I mentioned exactly how thoroughly out of sorts I am? One would think that you'd prefer to stay and comfort me."

"My dear Mercystar," he said. "If you know anything of me, then you will realize that leaving you alone is by far the best comfort I can offer."

She frowned, looking up.

"It was a joke, my dear," he said. "I am, unfortunately, quite bad at them. Scoot, you coming?"

Llarimar, who stood—as always—with the rest of the priests, looked toward him. "Your Grace?"

"No need to upset the others any further," Lightsong said. "I think that you and I alone will be sufficient for this exercise."

"As you command, Your Grace," Llarimar said. Once again, Lightsong's servants found themselves separated from their god. They clustered uncertainly on the grass—like a group of children abandoned by their parents.

"What is this about, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked quietly as they walked up to the palace.

"I honestly have no idea," Lightsong said. "I just feel that there's something odd going on here. The break-in. The death of that man. Something is wrong."

Llarimar looked at him, a strange expression on his face.

"What?" Lightsong asked.

"It is nothing, Your Grace," Llarimar finally said. "This is just a very uncharacteristic of you."

"I know," Lightsong said, feeling confident about the decision nonetheless. "I honestly can't say what prompted it. Curiosity, I guess."

"Curiosity that outweighs your desire to avoid doing . . . well, anything at all?"

Lightsong shrugged. He felt energized as he walked into the palace. His normal lethargy retreated, and instead he felt excitement. It was almost familiar. He found a group of priests chatting inside the servants' corridor. Lightsong walked right up to them, and they turned to regard him with shock.

"Ah, good," Lightsong said. "I assume you can tell me more of this break-in?"

"Your Grace," one said as all three bowed their heads. "I assure you, we have everything under control. There is no danger to you or your people."

"Yes, yes," Lightsong said, looking over the corridor. "Is this where the man was killed, then?"

They glanced at one another. "Over there," one of them said reluctantly, pointing to a turn in the hallway.

"Wonderful. Accompany me, if you please." Lightsong walked up to the indicated section. A group of workers were removing the boards from the floor, probably to be replaced. Bloodstained wood, no matter how well cleaned, would not do for a goddess's home.

"Hum," Lightsong said. "Looks messy. How did it happen?"

"We aren't sure, Your Grace," said one of the priests. "The intruder knocked the men at the doorway unconscious, but did not otherwise harm them."

"Yes, Mercystar mentioned that," Lightsong said. "But then he fought with four of the servants?"

"Well, 'fought' isn't quite the right word," the priest said, sighing. Though Lightsong wasn't their god, he was *a* god. They were bound by oath to answer his questions.

"He immobilized one of them with an Awakened rope," the priest continued. "Then, while one remained behind to delay the intruder, the other two ran for aid. The intruder quickly knocked the remaining man unconscious. At that time, the one who had been tied up was still alive." The

priest glanced at his colleagues. "When help finally came—delayed by a Lifeless animal that was causing confusion—they found the second man still unconscious. The first, still tied up, was dead. Stabbed through the heart with a dueling blade."

Lightsong nodded, kneeling beside the broken boards. The servants who had been working there bowed their heads and retreated. He wasn't certain what he expected to find. The floor had been scrubbed clean, then torn apart. However, there was a strange patch a short distance away. He walked over and knelt, inspecting it more closely. *Completely devoid of color,* he thought. He looked up, focusing on the priests. "An Awakener, you say?"

"Undoubtedly, Your Grace."

He looked back down at the grey patch. *There's no chance an Idrian did this,* he realized. *Not if he used Awakening.* "What was this Lifeless creature you mentioned?"

"A Lifeless squirrel, Your Grace," one of the men said. "The intruder used it as a diversion."

"Well made?" he asked.

They nodded. "Using modern Command words, if its actions were any judge," one said. "It even had ichor-alcohol instead of blood. Took us the better part of the night to catch the thing!"

"I see," Lightsong said, standing. "But the intruder escaped?"

"Yes, Your Grace," one of them said.

"What do you suppose he was after?"

The priests wavered. "We don't know for sure, Your Grace," one of them said. "We scared him away before he could reach his goal—one of our men saw him fleeing back out the way he had come. Perhaps the resistance was too much for him."

"We think that he may have been a common burglar, Your Grace," one said. "Here to sneak into the gallery and steal the art."

"Sounds likely enough to me," Lightsong said, standing. "Good work with this, and all that." He turned, walking back down the hallway toward the entrance. He felt strangely surreal.

The priests were lying to him.

He didn't know how he could tell. Yet he did—he knew it deep inside, with some instincts he hadn't realized he possessed. Instead of disturbing him, for some reason the lies excited him.

"Your Grace," Llarimar said, hurrying up. "Did you find what you wanted?"

"That was no Idrian who broke in," Lightsong said quietly as they walked into the sunlight.

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. "There have been cases of Idrians coming to Hallandren and buying themselves Breath, Your Grace."

"And have you ever heard of one using a Lifeless?"

Llarimar fell quiet. "No, Your Grace," he finally admitted.

"Idrians hate Lifeless. Consider them abominations, or some such nonsense. Either way, it wouldn't make sense for an Idrian to try and get in like that. What would be the point? Assassinating a single one of the Returned? He or she would only be replaced, and the protocols in place would be certain that even the Lifeless armies weren't without someone to direct them for long. The possibility for retaliation would far outweigh the benefit."

"So you believe that it was a thief?"

"Of course not," Lightsong said. "A 'common burglar' with enough money or Breath that he can *waste* a Lifeless, just for a diversion? Whoever broke in, he was already rich. Besides, why sneak through the servants' hallway? There are no valuables there. The *interior* of the palace holds far more wealth."

Llarimar fell quiet again. He looked over at Lightsong, the same curious expression as before on his face. "That's some very solid reasoning, Your Grace."

"I know," Lightsong said. "I feel positively unlike myself. Perhaps I need to go get drunk."

"You can't get drunk."

"Ah, but I certainly enjoy trying."

They walked back toward his palace, picking up his servants on the way. Llarimar seemed unsettled. Lightsong, however, simply felt excited. *Murder in the Court of Gods,* he thought. *True, it was only a servant—but I'm supposed to be a god for all people, not just important ones. I wonder how long it's been since someone was killed in the court? Hasn't happened in my lifetime, certainly.*

Mercystar's priests were hiding something. Why had the intruder released a diversion—particularly such an expensive one—if he were simply going to run away? The servants of the Returned were not formidable soldiers or warriors. So why had he given up so easily?

All good questions. Good questions that he, of all people, shouldn't have bothered to wonder about. And yet, he did.

All the way back to the palace, through a nice meal, and even into the night.

24

Siri's servants clustered around her uncertainly as she walked into the chaotic room. She wore a blue and white gown with a ten-foot train. As she entered, scribes and priests looked up in shock; some immediately scrambled to their feet, bowing. Others just stared as she passed, her serving women doing their best to hold her train with dignity.

Determined, Siri continued through the chamber—which was more like a hallway than a proper room. Long tables lined the walls, stacks of paper cluttered those tables, and scribes—Pahn Kahl men in brown, Hallandren men in the day's colors—worked on the papers. The walls were, of course, black. Colored rooms were only found in the center of the palace, where the God King and Siri spent most of their time. Separately, of course.

Though, things are a little different at night, she thought, smiling. It felt very conspiratorial of her to be teaching him letters. She had a secret that she was keeping from the rest of the kingdom, a secret that involved one of the most powerful men in the entire world. That gave her a thrill. She supposed she should have been more worried. Indeed, in her more thoughtful moments, the reality behind Bluefingers's warnings did worry her. That's why she had come to the scribes' quarters.

I wonder why the bedchamber is out here, she thought. *Outside the main body of the palace, in the black part.*

Either way, the servants' section of the palace—God King's bedchamber excluded—was the last place the scribes expected to be disturbed by their

queen. Siri noticed that some of her serving women looked apologetically at the men in the room as Siri arrived at the doors on the far side. A servant opened the door for her, and she entered the room beyond.

A relaxed group of priests stood leafing through books in the medium-sized chamber. They looked over at her. One dropped his book to the floor in shock.

"I," Siri proclaimed, "want some books!"

The priests stared at her. "Books?" one finally asked.

"Yes," Siri said, hands on hips. "This is the palace library, is it not?"

"Well, yes, Vessel," the priest said, glancing at his companions. All wore the robes of their office, and this day's colors were violet and silver.

"Well, then," Siri said. "I'd like to borrow some of the books. I am tired of common entertainment and shall be reading to myself in my spare time."

"Surely you don't want *these* books, Vessel," another priest said. "They are about boring topics like religion or city finances. Surely a book of stories would be more appropriate."

Siri raised an eyebrow. "And where might I find such a 'more appropriate' volume?"

"We could have a reader bring the book from the city collection," the priest said, stepping forward smoothly. "He'd be here shortly."

Siri hesitated. "No. I do not like that option. I shall take some of these books here."

"No, you shall not," a new voice said from behind.

Siri turned. Treledees, high priest of the God King, stood behind her, fingers laced, miter on his head, frown on his face.

"You cannot refuse me," Siri said. "I am your queen."

"I can and *will* refuse you, Vessel," Treledees said. "You see, these books are quite valuable, and should something happen to them, the kingdom would suffer grave consequences. Even our priests are not allowed to bear them out of the room."

"What could happen to them in the *palace,* of all places?" she demanded.

"It is the principle, Vessel. These are the property of a god. Susebron has made it clear that he wishes the books to stay here."

Oh he has, has he? For Treledees and the priests, having a tongueless god was very convenient. The priests could claim that he'd told them whatever served the purposes of the moment, and he could never correct them.

"If you absolutely must read these volumes," Treledees said, "you can stay here to do it."

She glanced at the room and thought of the stuffy priests standing in a flock around her, listening to her sound out words, making a fool of herself. If anything in these volumes was sensitive, they'd probably find a way to distract her and keep her from finding it.

"No," Siri said, retreating from the crowded room. "Perhaps another time."

I told you that they would not let you have the books, the God King wrote.

Siri rolled her eyes and flopped back onto the bed. She still wore her heavy evening dress. For some reason, being able to communicate with the God King made her even shyer. She only took off the dresses right before she went to sleep—which, lately, was getting later and later. Susebron sat in his usual place—not on the mattress, as he had that first night. Instead, he had pulled his chair up beside the bed. He still seemed so large and imposing. At least, he did until he looked at her, his face open, honest. He waved her back toward him where he sat with a board, writing with a bit of charcoal that she'd smuggled in.

You shud not anger the prests so, he wrote. His spelling, as one might expect, was awful.

Priests. She had pilfered a cup, then had hidden it in the room. If she held it to the wall and listened, she could sometimes faintly hear talking on the other side. After her nightly moaning and bouncing, she could usually hear chairs moving and a door closing. After that, there was silence in the other room.

Either the priests left each night once they were sure the deed was done or they were suspicious and trying to fool her into thinking they were gone. Her instinct said the former, though she made certain to whisper when she spoke to the God King, just in case.

Siri? he wrote. *What are you thinking about?*

"Your priests," she whispered. "They frustrate me! They intentionally do things to spite me."

They are good men, he wrote. *They work very hard to mayntayn my kingdom.*

"They cut out your tongue," she said.

The God King sat quietly for a few moments. *It was nesisary,* he wrote. *I have too much power.*

She moved over. As usual, he shied back when she approached, moving his arm out of the way. There was no arrogance in this reaction. She had begun to think that he just had very little experience with touching.

"Susebron," she whispered. "These men are *not* looking after your best interests. They did more than cut out your tongue. They speak in your name, doing whatever they please."

They are not my enemes, he wrote stubbornly. *They are good men.*

"Oh?" she said. "Then why do you hide from them the fact that you're learning to read?"

He paused again, glancing downward.

So much humility for one who has ruled Hallandren for fifty years, she thought. *In many ways, he's like a child.*

I do not want them to know, he finally wrote. *I do not want to upset them.*

"I'm sure," Siri said flatly.

He paused. *You are shur?* he wrote. *Does that mean you beleve me?*

"No," Siri said. "That was sarcasm, Susebron."

He frowned. *I do not know this thing. Sarkazm.*

"Sarcasm," she said, spelling it. "It's . . ." She trailed off. "It's when you say one thing, but you really mean the opposite."

He frowned at her, then furiously erased his board and began writing again. *This thing makes no sense. Why not say what you mean?*

"Because," Siri said. "It's just like . . . oh, I don't know. It's a way to be clever when you make fun of people."

Make fun of people? he wrote.

God of Colors! Siri thought, trying to think of how to explain. It seemed ridiculous to her that he would know nothing of mockery. And yet, he had lived his entire life as a revered deity and monarch. "Mockery is when you say things to tease," Siri said. "Things that might be hurtful to someone if said in anger, but you say them in an affectionate or in a playful way. Sometimes you *do* just say them to be mean. Sarcasm is one of the ways we mock—we say the opposite, but in an exaggerated way."

How do you know if the person is affekshonate, playful, or mean?

"I don't know," Siri said. "It's the way they say it, I guess."

The God King sat, looking confused but thoughtful. *You are very normal,* he finally wrote.

Siri frowned. "Um. Thank you?"

Was that good sarcasm? he wrote. *Because in reality, you are quite strange.*

She smiled. "I try my best."

He looked up.

"That was sarcasm again," she said. "I don't 'try' to be strange. It just happens."

He looked at her. How had she ever been frightened of this man? How had she misunderstood? The look in his eyes, it wasn't arrogance or emotionlessness. It was the look of a man who was trying very hard to understand the world around him. It was innocence. Earnestness.

However, he was not simple. The speed at which he'd learned to write proved that. True, he'd already understood the spoken version of the language—and he'd memorized all of the letters in the book years before meeting her. She'd only needed to explain the rules of spelling and sound for him to make the final jump.

She still found it amazing how quickly he picked things up. She smiled at him, and he hesitantly smiled back.

"Why do you say that I'm strange?" she asked.

You do not do things like other people, he wrote. *Everyone else bows before me all of the time. Nobody talks to me. Even the prests, they only okashonally give me instrukshons—and they haven't done that in years.*

"Does it offend you that I don't bow, and that I talk to you like a friend?"

He erased his board. *Offend me? Why would it offend me? Do you do it in sarcasm?*

"No," she said quickly. "I really like talking to you."

Then I do not understand.

"Everyone else is afraid of you," Siri said. "Because of how powerful you are."

But they took away my tongue to make me safe.

"It's not your Breath that scares them," Siri said. "It's your power over armies and people. You're the God King. You could order anyone in the kingdom killed."

But why would I do that? he wrote. *I would not kill a good person. They must know that.*

Siri sat back, resting on the plush bed, the fire crackling in the hearth behind them. "I know that, now," she said. "But nobody else does. They don't know you, they know only how powerful you are. So they fear you. And so they show their respect for you."

He paused. *And so, you do not respect me?*

"Of course I do," she said, sighing. "I've just never been very good at following rules. In fact, if someone tells me what to do, I usually want to do the opposite."

That is very strange, he wrote. *I thought all people did what they were told.*

"I think you'll find that most do not," she said, smiling.

That will get you into trouble.

"Is that what the priests taught you?"

He shook his head; then he reached over and took out his book. The book of stories for children. He brought it with him always, and she could see from his reverent touch that he valued it greatly.

It's probably his only real possession, she thought. *Everything else is taken from him every day, then replaced the next morning.*

This book, he wrote. *My mother read the stories to me when I was a child. I memorized them all, before she was taken away. It speaks of many children who do not do as they are told. They are often eaten by monsters.*

"Oh are they?" Siri said, smiling.

Do not be afraid, he wrote. *My mother taught me that the monsters are not real. But I remember the lessons the stories taught. Obediance is good. You shud treat people well. Do not go into the jungle by yourself. Do not lie. Do not hurt others.*

Siri's smile deepened. Everything he'd learned in his life, he'd either gotten from moralistic folktales or from priests who were teaching him to be a figurehead. Once she realized that, the simple, honest man that he had become was not so difficult to understand.

Yet what had prompted him to defy that learning and ask her to teach him? Why was he willing to keep his learning secret from the men he had been taught all his life to obey and trust? He was not quite so innocent as he appeared.

"These stories," she said. "Your desire to treat people well. Is that what kept you from . . . taking me on any of those nights when I first came into the room?"

From taking you? I do not understand.

Siri blushed, hair turning red to match. "I mean, why did you just sit there?"

Because I did not know what else to do, he said. *I knew that we need to have a child. So I sat and waited for it to happen. We must be doing something wrong, for no child has come.*

Siri paused, then blinked. He couldn't possibly . . . "You don't know how to have children?"

In the stories, he wrote, *a man and a woman spend the night together. Then they have a child. We spent many nights together, and there were no children.*

"And nobody—none of your priests—explained the process to you?"

No. What process do you mean?

She sat for a moment. *No,* she thought, feeling her blush deepen. *I am* not *going to have that conversation with him.* "I think we'll talk about it another time."

It was a very strange experiance when you came into the room that first night, he wrote. *I must admit, I was very scared of you.*

Siri smiled as she remembered her own terror. It hadn't even occurred to her that he would be frightened. Why would it have? He was the God King.

"So," she said, tapping the bedspread with one finger, "you were never taken to other women?"

No, he wrote. *I did find it very interesting to see you naked.*

She flushed again, though her hair had apparently decided to just stay red. "That's not what we're talking about right now," she said. "I want to know about other women. No mistresses? No concubines?"

No.

"They really are scared of you having a child."

Why say that? he wrote. *They sent you to me.*

"Only after fifty years of rule," she said. "And only under very controlled circumstances, with the proper lineage to produce a child with the right bloodline. Bluefingers thinks that child might be a danger to us."

I do not understand why, he wrote. *This is what everyone wants. There must be an heir.*

"Why?" Siri said. "You still look like you're barely two decades old. Your aging is slowed by your BioChroma."

Without an heir, the kingdom is in danger. Should I be killed, there will be nobody to rule.

"And that wasn't a danger for the last fifty years?"

He paused, frowning, then slowly erased his board.

"They must think that you're in danger now," she said slowly. "But not from sickness—even I know that Returned don't suffer from diseases. In fact, do they even age at all?"

I don't think so, the God King wrote.

"How did the previous God Kings die?"

There have been only four, he wrote. *I do not know how they died for certain.*

"Only four kings in several hundred years, all dead of mysterious circumstances. . . ."

My father died before I was old enough to remember him, Susebron wrote. *I was told he gave his life for the kingdom—that he released his BioChromatic Breath, as all Returned can, to cure a terrible disease. The other Returned can only cure one person. A God King, however, can cure many. That is what I was told.*

"There must be a record of that then," she said. "Somewhere in those books the priests have guarded so tightly."

I am sorry that they would not let you read them, he wrote.

She waved an indifferent hand. "There wasn't much chance of it working. I'll need to find another way to get at those histories." *Having a child* is *the danger,* she thought. *That's what Bluefingers said. So whatever threat there is to my life, it will only come after there is an heir. Bluefingers mentioned a threat to the God King too. That almost makes it sound like the danger comes from the priests themselves. Why would they want to harm their own god?*

She glanced at Susebron, who was flipping intently through his book of stories. She smiled at the look of concentration on his face as he deciphered the text.

Well, she thought, *considering what he knows of sex, I'd say that we don't have to worry much about having a child in the near future.*

Of course, she was also worried that the lack of a child would prove just as dangerous as the presence of one.

25

Vivenna went among the people of T'Telir and couldn't help feeling that every one of them recognized her.

She fought the feeling down. It was actually a miracle that Thame—who came from her own home city—had been able to pick her out. The people around her would have no way of connecting Vivenna to the rumors they might have heard, especially considering her clothing.

Immodest reds and yellows layered one atop the other on her dress. The garment had been the only one that Parlin and Tonk Fah had been able to find that met her stringent requirements for modesty. The tubelike dress was made after a foreign cut, from Tedradel, across the Inner Sea. It came down almost to her ankles, and though its snugness emphasized her bust, at least the garment covered her almost up to the neck, and had full-length sleeves.

Rebelliously, she did find herself stealing glances at the other women in their loose, short skirts and sleeveless tops. That much exposed skin was scandalous, but with the blazing sun and the cursed coastal humidity, she could see why they did it.

After a month in the city, she was also beginning to get the hang of moving with the flow of traffic. She still wasn't sure she wanted to be out, but Denth had been persuasive.

You know the worst thing that can happen to a bodyguard? he had asked. *Letting your charge get killed when you aren't even there. We have a small team,*

Princess. We can either divide and leave you behind with one guard or you can come with us. Personally, I'd like to have you along where I can keep an eye on you.

And so she'd come. Dressed in one of her new gowns, her hair turned an uncomfortable—yet un-Idrian—yellow and left loose, blowing behind her. She walked around the garden square, as if out on a stroll, moving so that she wouldn't look nervous. The people of T'Telir liked gardens—they had all kinds all over the city. In fact, from what Vivenna had seen, most of the city practically *was* a garden. Palms and ferns grew on every street, and exotic flowers bloomed everywhere year-round.

Four streets crossed in the square, with four plots of cultivated ground forming a checkerboard pattern. Each sprouted a dozen different palms. The buildings surrounding the gardens were more rich than the ones in the market up the way. And while there was plenty of foot traffic, people made certain to stick to the slate sidewalks, for carriages were common. This was a wealthy shopping district. No tents. Fewer performers. Higher quality—and more expensive—shops.

Vivenna strolled along the perimeter of the northwestern garden block. There were ferns and grass to her right. Shops of a quaint, rich, and—of course—colorful variety lay across the street to her left. Tonk Fah and Parlin lounged between two of these. Parlin had the monkey on his shoulder, and had taken to wearing a colorful red vest with his green hat. She couldn't help thinking that the woodsman was even more out of place in T'Telir than she was, but he didn't seem to attract any attention.

Vivenna kept walking. Jewels trailed her somewhere in the crowd. The woman was good—Vivenna only rarely caught a glimpse of her, and that was because she'd been told where to look. She never saw Denth. He was there somewhere, far too stealthy for her to spot. As she reached the end of the street and turned around to walk back, she did catch sight of Clod. The Lifeless stood as still as one of the D'Denir statues that lined the gardens, impassively watching the crowds pass. Most of the people ignored him.

Denth was right. Lifeless weren't plentiful, but they also weren't uncommon. Several walked through the market carrying packages for their owners. None of these were as muscular or as tall as Clod—Lifeless came in as many shapes and sizes as people. They were put to work guarding shops. Acting as packmen. Sweeping the walkway. All around her.

She continued to walk, and she caught a brief glimpse of Jewels in the crowd as she passed. *How does she manage to look so relaxed?* Vivenna thought. Each of the mercenaries looked as calm as if they were at a leisurely picnic.

Don't think about the danger, Vivenna thought, clinching her fists. She focused on the gardens. The truth was, she was a little jealous of the T'Telirites. People lounged, sitting on the grass, lying in the shade of trees, their children playing and laughing. D'Denir statues stood in a solemn line, arms upraised, weapons at the ready, as if in defense of the people. Trees climbed high into the sky, spreading branches that grew strange flowerlike bundles.

Wide-petaled flowers bloomed in planters; some of them were actually Tears of Edgli. Austre had placed the flowers where he wanted them. To cut and bring them back, to use them to adorn a room or house, was ostentation. Yet was it ostentatious to plant them in the middle of the city, where all were free to enjoy them?

She turned away. Her BioChroma continued to sense the beauty. The density of life in one area made a sort of buzz inside her chest.

No wonder they like to live so close together, she thought, noticing how a group of flowers scaled in color, fanning toward the inside of their planter. *And if you're going to live this compactly, the only way to see nature would be to bring it in.*

"Help! Fire!"

Vivenna spun, as did most of the other people on the street. The building Tonk Fah and Parlin had been standing next to was burning. Vivenna didn't continue to gawk, but turned and looked toward the center of the gardens. Most of the people in the garden itself were stunned, looking toward the smoke billowing into the air.

Distraction one.

People ran to help, crossing the street, causing carriages to pull up abruptly. At that moment, Clod stepped forward—surging with the crowd—and swung a club at the leg of a horse. Vivenna couldn't hear the leg break, but she did see the beast scream and fall, upsetting the carriage it had been pulling. A trunk fell from the top of the vehicle, plunging to the street.

The carriage belonged to one Nanrovah, high priest of the god Stillmark. Denth's intelligence said the carriage would be carrying valuables. Even if it weren't, a high priest in danger would draw a lot of attention. The

trunk hit the street. And, in a twist of good fortune, it shattered, spraying out gold coins.

Distraction two.

Vivenna caught a glimpse of Jewels standing on the other side of the carriage. She looked at Vivenna and nodded. Time to go. As people ran toward either gold or fire, Vivenna walked away. Nearby, Denth would be raiding one of the shops with a gang of thieves. The thieves got to keep the goods. Vivenna just wanted to make certain those goods disappeared.

Vivenna was joined by Jewels and Parlin on the way out. She was surprised to feel how quickly her heart was thumping. Almost nothing had happened. No real danger. No threat to herself. Just a couple of "accidents."

But, then, that was the idea.

Hours later, Denth and Tonk Fah still hadn't returned to the house. Vivenna sat quietly on their new furniture, hands in her lap. The furniture was green. Apparently, brown was not an option in T'Telir.

"What time is it?" Vivenna asked quietly.

"I don't know," Jewels snapped, standing beside the window, looking out at the street.

Patience, Vivenna told herself. *It's not her fault she's so abrasive. She had her Breath stolen.*

"Should they be back yet?" Vivenna asked calmly.

Jewels shrugged. "Maybe. Depends on if they decided to go to a safe house to let things cool down first or not."

"I see. How long do you think we should wait?"

"As long as we have to," Jewels said. "Look, do you think you could just not talk to me? I'd really appreciate it." She turned back to look out the window.

Vivenna stiffened at the insult. *Patience!* she told herself. *Understand her place. That's what the Five Visions teach.*

Vivenna stood up, then walked quietly over to Jewels. Tentatively, she laid an arm on the other woman's shoulder. Jewels jumped immediately—obviously, without Breath, it was harder for her to notice when people approached her.

"It's all right," Vivenna said. "I understand."

"Understand?" Jewels asked. "Understand what?"

"They took your Breath," Vivenna said. "They had no right to do something so terrible."

Vivenna smiled, then withdrew, walking to the stairs.

Jewels started laughing. Vivenna stopped, glancing back.

"You think you *understand* me?" Jewels asked. "What? You feel sorry for me because I'm a Drab?"

"Your parents shouldn't have done what they did."

"My parents served our God King," Jewels said. "My Breath was given to him directly. It's a greater honor than you could possibly understand."

Vivenna stood still for a moment, absorbing that comment. "You *believe* in the Iridescent Tones?"

"Of course I do," Jewels said. "I'm a Hallandren, aren't I?"

"But the others—"

"Tonk Fah is from Pahn Kahl," Jewels said. "And I don't know where in the Colors *Denth* is from. But I'm from T'Telir itself."

"But surely you can't still worship those so-called gods," Vivenna said. "Not after what was done to you."

"What was done to me? I'll have you know that I gave away my Breath willingly."

"You were a child!"

"I was eleven and my parents gave me the choice. I made the right one. My father had been in the dye industry, but had slipped and fallen. The damage to his back wouldn't allow him to work, and I had five brothers and sisters. Do you know what it's like to watch your brothers and sisters starve? Years before, my parents had already sold their Breath to get enough money to start the business. By selling mine, we got enough money to live for nearly a year!"

"No price is worth a soul," Vivenna said. "You—"

"Stop judging me!" Jewels snapped. "Kalad's Phantoms take you, woman. I was *proud* to sell my Breath! I still am. A part of me lives inside the God King. Because of me, he continues to live. I'm *part* of this kingdom in a way that few others are."

Jewels shook her head, turning away. "That's why we get annoyed by you Idrians. So high, so certain that what you do is *right*. If your god asked you to give up your Breath—or even the Breath of your child—wouldn't you do

it? You give up your children to become monks, forcing them into a life of servitude, don't you? That's seen as a sign of faith. Yet when we do something to serve *our* gods, you twist your lips at us and call us blasphemers."

Vivenna opened her mouth, but could come up with no response. Sending children away to become monks was different.

"We sacrifice for our gods," Jewels said, still staring out the window. "But that doesn't mean we're being exploited. My family was blessed because of what we did. Not only was there enough money to buy food, but my father recovered, and a few years later, he was able to open up the dye business again. My brothers still run it.

"You don't have to believe in my miracles. You can call them accidents or coincidences, if you must. But don't pity me for my faith. And don't presume that you're better, just because you believe something different."

Vivenna closed her mouth. Obviously, there was no point in arguing. Jewels was in no mood for her sympathy. Vivenna retreated back up the stairs.

A few hours later, it began to grow dark. Vivenna stood on the house's second-story balcony, looking out over the city. Most of the buildings on their street had such balconies on the front. Ostentatious or not, from their hillside location they did provide a good view of T'Telir.

The city glowed with light. On the larger streets, pole-mounted lamps lined the sidewalks, lit each night by city workers. Many of the buildings were illuminated as well. Such expenditure of oil and candles still amazed her. Yet with the Inner Sea to hand, oil was far cheaper than it was in the highlands.

She didn't know what to make of Jewels's outburst. How could someone be *proud* that their Breath had been stolen and then fed to a greedy Returned? The woman's tone seemed to indicate she was being sincere. She'd obviously thought about these things before. Obviously, she had to rationalize her experiences to live with them.

Vivenna was trapped. The Five Visions taught that she must try to understand others. They told her not to place herself above them. And yet, Austrism taught that what Jewels had done was an abomination.

The two seemed contradictory. To believe that Jewels was wrong was to

place herself above the woman. Yet to accept what Jewels said was to deny Austrism. Some might have laughed at her turmoil, but Vivenna had always tried very hard to be devout. She'd understood that she'd need strict devotion to survive in heathen Hallandren.

Heathen. Didn't she place herself above Hallandren by calling it that word? But they *were* heathen. She couldn't accept the Returned as true gods. It seemed that to believe in any faith was to become arrogant.

Perhaps she deserved the things Jewels had said to her.

Someone approached. Vivenna turned as Denth pushed open the wooden door and stepped out onto the balcony. "We're back," he announced.

"I know," she said, looking out over the city and its specks of light. "I felt you enter the building a little while ago."

He chuckled, joining her. "I forget that you have so much Breath, Princess. You never use it."

Except to feel when people are nearby, she thought. *But I can't help that, can I?*

"I recognize that look of frustration," Denth noted. "Still worried that the plan isn't working fast enough?"

She shook her head. "Other things entirely, Denth."

"Probably shouldn't have left you alone so long with Jewels. I hope she didn't take *too* many bites out of you."

Vivenna didn't respond. Finally, she sighed, then turned toward him. "How did the job go?"

"Perfectly," Denth said. "By the time we hit the shop, *nobody* was looking. Considering the guards they put there every night, they must be feeling pretty stupid to have been robbed in broad daylight."

"I still don't understand what good it will do," she said. "A spice merchant's shop?"

"Not his shop," Denth said. "His stores. We ruined or carted off every barrel of salt in that cellar. He's one of only three men who store salt in any great amount; most of the other spice merchants buy from him."

"Yes, but salt," Vivenna said. "What's the point?"

"How hot was it today?" Denth asked.

Vivenna shrugged. "Too hot."

"What happens to meat when it's hot?"

"It rots," Vivenna said. "But they don't have to use salt to preserve meat. They can use . . ."

"Ice?" Denth asked, chuckling. "No, not down here, Princess. You want to preserve meat, you salt it. And if you want an army to carry fish with them from the Inner Sea to attack a place as far away as Idris . . ."

Vivenna smiled.

"The thieves we worked with will ship the salt away," Denth said. "Smuggle it to the distant kingdoms where it can be sold openly. By the time this war comes, the Crown will have some real trouble keeping its men supplied with meat. Just another small strike, but those should add up."

"Thank you," Vivenna said.

"Don't thank us," Denth said. "Just pay us."

Vivenna nodded. They fell silent for a time, looking out over the city.

"Does Jewels really believe in the Iridescent Tones?" Vivenna finally asked.

"As passionately as Tonk Fah likes to nap," Denth said. He eyed her. "You didn't challenge her, did you?"

"Kind of."

Denth whistled. "And you're still standing? I'll have to thank her for her restraint."

"How can she believe?" Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. "Seems like a good enough religion to me. I mean, you can go and *see* her gods. Talk to them, watch them shine. It isn't all that tough to understand."

"But she's working for an Idrian," Vivenna said. "Working to undermine her own gods' ability to wage war. That was a *priest's* carriage we knocked over today."

"And a fairly important one, actually," Denth said with a chuckle. "Ah, Princess. It's a little difficult to understand. Mind-set of a mercenary. We're paid to do things—but *we're* not the ones doing them. It's *you* who do these things. We're just your tools."

"Tools that work against the Hallandren gods."

"That isn't a reason to stop believing," Denth said. "We get pretty good at separating ourselves from the things we have to do. Maybe that's what makes people hate us so much. They can't see that if we kill a friend on a battlefield, it doesn't mean that we're callous or untrustworthy. We do what we're paid to do. Just like anyone else."

"It's different," Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. "Do you think the refiner ever considers that the iron he purifies could end up in a sword that kills a friend of his?"

Vivenna stared out over the lights of the city and all of the people they represented, with all their different beliefs, different ways of thinking, different contradictions. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who struggled to believe two seemingly opposing things at the same time.

"What about you, Denth?" she asked. "Are you Hallandren?"

"Gods, no," he said.

"Then what do you believe?"

"Haven't believed much," he said. "Not in a long time."

"What about your family?" Vivenna asked. "What did they believe?"

"Family's all dead. They believed faiths that most everybody has forgotten by now. I never joined them."

Vivenna frowned. "You have to believe in something. If not a religion, then somebody. A way of living."

"I did once."

"Do you always have to answer so vaguely?"

He glanced at her. "Yes," he said. "Except, perhaps, for that question."

She rolled her eyes.

He leaned against the banister. "The things I believed," he said, "I don't know that they'd make sense, or that you'd even hear me out if I told you about them."

"You claim to seek money," she said. "But you don't. I've seen Lemex's ledgers. He wasn't paying you that much. Not as much as I'd assumed by far. And, if you'd wanted, you could have hit that priest's carriage and taken the money. You could have stolen it twice as easily as you did the salt."

He didn't respond.

"You don't serve any kingdom or king that I can figure out," she continued. "You're a better swordsman than any simple bodyguard—I suspect better than almost anyone, if you can impress a crime boss with your skill so easily. You could have fame, students, and prizes if you decided to become a sport duelist. You claim to obey your employer, but you give the orders more often than take them—and besides, since you don't care about money, that whole employee thing is probably just a front."

She paused. "In fact," she said, "the only thing I've ever seen you express even a spark of emotion about is that man, Vasher. The one with the sword."

Even as she said the name, Denth grew more tense.

"Who *are* you?" she asked.

He turned toward her, eyes hard, showing her—once again—that the jovial man he showed the world was a mask. A charade. A softness to cover the stone within.

"I'm a mercenary," he said.

"All right," she said, "then who *were* you?"

"You don't want to know the answer to that," he said. And then he left, stomping away through the door and leaving her alone on the dark wooden balcony.

26

Lightsong awoke and immediately climbed from bed. He stood up, stretched, and smiled. "Beautiful day," he said.

His servants stood at the edges of the room, watching uncertainly.

"What?" Lightsong asked, holding out his arms. "Come on, let's get dressed."

They rushed forward. Llarimar entered shortly after. Lightsong often wondered how early he got up, since each morning when Lightsong rose, Llarimar was always there.

Llarimar watched him with a raised eyebrow. "You're chipper this morning, Your Grace."

Lightsong shrugged. "It just felt like it was time to get up."

"A full hour earlier than usual."

Lightsong cocked his head as the servants tied off his robes. "Really?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Fancy that," Lightsong said, nodding to his servants as they stepped back, leaving him dressed.

"Shall we go over your dreams, then?" Llarimar asked.

Lightsong paused, an image flashing in his head. Rain. Tempest. Storms. And a brilliant red panther.

"Nope," Lightsong said, walking toward the doorway.

"Your Grace . . ."

"We'll talk about the dreams another time, Scoot," Lightsong said. "We have more important work."

"More important work?"

Lightsong smiled, reaching the doorway and turning back. "I want to go back to Mercystar's palace."

"What ever for?"

"I don't know," Lightsong said happily.

Llarimar sighed. "Very well, Your Grace. But can we at least look over some art, first? There are people who paid good money to get your opinion, and some are waiting quite eagerly to hear what you think of their pieces."

"All right," Lightsong said. "But let's be quick about it."

Lightsong stared at the painting.

Red upon red, shades so subtle that the painter must have been of the First Heightening at least. Violent, terrible reds, clashing against one another like waves—waves that only vaguely resembled men, yet that somehow managed to convey the idea of armies fighting much better than any detailed realistic depiction could have.

Chaos. Bloody wounds upon bloody uniforms upon bloody skin. There was so much violence in red. His own color. He almost felt as if he were *in* the painting—felt its turmoil shaking him, disorienting him, *pulling* on him.

The waves of men pointed toward one figure at the center. A woman, vaguely depicted by a couple of curved brushstrokes. And yet it was obvious. She stood high, as if atop a cresting wave of crashing soldiers, caught in midmotion, head flung back, her arm upraised.

Holding a deep black sword that darkened the red sky around it.

"The Battle of Twilight Falls," Llarimar said quietly, standing beside him in the white hallway. "Last conflict of the Manywar."

Lightsong nodded. He'd known that, somehow. The faces of many of the soldiers were tinged with grey. They were Lifeless. The Manywar had been the first time they had been used in large numbers on the battlefield.

"I know you don't prefer war scenes," Llarimar said. "But—"

"I like it," Lightsong said, cutting off the priest. "I like it a lot."

Llarimar fell silent.

Lightsong stared into the painting with its flowing reds, painted so subtly that they gave a *feeling* of war, rather than just an image. "It might be the best painting that has ever passed through my hall."

The priests on the other side of the room began writing furiously. Llarimar just stared at him, troubled.

"What?" Lightsong asked.

"It's nothing," Llarimar said.

"Scoot . . ." Lightsong said, eyeing him.

The priest sighed. "I can't speak, Your Grace. I cannot taint your impression of the paintings."

"A lot of gods have been giving favorable reviews of war paintings lately, eh?" Lightsong said, looking back at the artwork.

Llarimar didn't answer.

"It's probably nothing," Lightsong said. "Just our response to those arguments in the court, I'd guess."

"Likely," Llarimar said.

Lightsong fell silent. He knew it wasn't "nothing" to Llarimar. To him, Lightsong wasn't just giving his impression of art—he was foretelling the future. What did it augur that he liked a depiction of war with such vibrant, brutal colorings? Was it a reaction to his dreams? But last night, he hadn't dreamed of a war. Finally. He'd dreamed of a storm, true, but that wasn't the same thing.

I shouldn't have spoken, he thought. And yet, reacting to the art seemed like the only truly important thing he did.

He stared at the sharp smears of paint, each figure a just a couple of triangular strokes. It was beautiful. Could war be beautiful? How could he find beauty in those grey faces confronting flesh, the Lifeless killing men? This battle hadn't even meant anything. It hadn't decided the outcome of the war, even though the leader of the Pahn Unity—the kingdoms united against Hallandren—had been killed in the battle. Diplomacy had finally ended the Manywar, not bloodshed.

Are we thinking of starting this up again? Lightsong thought, still transfixed by the beauty. *Is what I do going to lead to war?*

No, he thought to himself. *No, I'm just being careful. Helping Blush-*

weaver secure a political faction. Better that than letting things just pass me by. The Manywar started because the royal family wasn't careful.

The painting continued to call to him. "What's that sword?" Lightsong asked.

"Sword?"

"The black one," Lightsong said. "In the woman's hand."

"I . . . I don't see a sword, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "To tell you the truth, I don't see a woman, either. It's all just wild strokes of paint, to me."

"You called it the Battle of Twilight Falls."

"The title of the piece, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "I assumed that you were as confused by it as I was, so I told you what the artist had named it."

The two fell silent. Finally, Lightsong turned, walking away from the painting. "I'm done reviewing art for the day." He hesitated. "Don't burn that painting. Keep it for my collection."

Llarimar acknowledge the command with a nod. As Lightsong made his way out of the palace, he tried to regain some of his eagerness, and he succeeded—though memory of the terrible, beautiful scene stayed with him. Mixing with his memories of last night's dream, with its clashing tempest of winds.

Not even that could dampen his mood. Something was different. Something excited him. There had been a murder in the Court of Gods.

He didn't know why he should find that so intriguing. If anything, he should find it tragic or upsetting. And yet for as long as he had lived, everything had been provided for him. Answers to his questions, entertainment to sate his whims. Almost by accident, he had become a glutton. Only two things had been withheld from him: knowledge of his past and freedom to leave the court.

Neither of those restrictions was going to change soon. But here, inside the court—the place of too much safety and comfort—something had gone wrong. A little thing. A thing most Returned would ignore. Nobody cared. Nobody wanted to care. Who, therefore, would object to Lightsong's questions?

"You're acting very oddly, Your Grace," Llarimar said, catching up to him as they crossed the grass, servants following behind in a chaotic cluster as they worked to get a large red parasol open.

"I know," Lightsong said. "However, I believe we can agree that I have *always* been rather odd, for a god."

"I must admit that is true."

"Then I'm actually being very like myself," Lightsong said. "And all is right in the universe."

"Are we really going back to Mercystar's palace?"

"Indeed we are. Do you suppose she'll be annoyed at us? That might prove interesting."

Llarimar just sighed. "Are you ready to talk about your dreams yet?"

Lightsong did not immediately reply. The servants finally got the parasol up and held it over him. "I dreamed of a storm," Lightsong finally said. "I was standing in it, without anything to brace myself. It was raining and blowing against me, forcing me backward. In fact, it was so strong that even the ground beneath me seemed to undulate."

Llarimar looked disturbed.

More signs of war, Lightsong thought. *Or, at least, that's how he'll see it.*

"Anything else?"

"Yes," Lightsong said. "A red panther. It seemed to shine, reflective, like it was made of glass or something like that. It was waiting in the storm."

Llarimar eyed him. "Are you making things up, Your Grace?"

"What? No! That's really what I dreamed."

Llarimar sighed, but nodded to a lesser priest, who rushed up to take his dictation. It wasn't long before they reached Mercystar's palace of yellow and gold. Lightsong paused before the building, realizing that he'd never before visited another god's palace without first sending a messenger.

"Do you want me to send in someone to announce you, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked.

Lightsong hesitated. "No," he finally said, noticing a pair of guards standing at the main doorway. The two men looked far more muscular than the average servant and they wore swords. Dueling blades, Lightsong assumed—though he'd never actually seen one.

He walked up to the men. "Is your mistress here?"

"I am afraid not, Your Grace," one of them said. "She went to visit Allmother for the afternoon."

Allmother, Lightsong thought. *Another with Lifeless Commands. Blushweaver's doing?* Perhaps he would drop by later—he missed chatting with All-

mother. She, unfortunately, hated him violently. "Ah," Lightsong said to the guard. "Well, regardless, I need to inspect the corridor just inside here, where the attack happened the other night."

The guards glanced at each other. "I . . . don't know if we can let you do that, Your Grace."

"Scoot!" Lightsong said. "Can they forbid me?"

"Only if they have a direct command to do so from Mercystar."

Lightsong looked back at the men. Reluctantly, they stepped aside. "It's perfectly all right," he told them. "She asked me to take care of things. Kind of. Coming, Scoot?"

Llarimar followed him into the corridors. Once again, Lightsong felt an odd satisfaction. Instincts he hadn't know he had drove him to seek out the place where the servant had died.

The wood had been replaced—his Heightened eyes could easily tell the difference between the new wood and the old. He walked a little farther. The patch where the wood had turned grey was gone as well, seamlessly replaced with new material.

Interesting, he thought. *But not unexpected. I wonder . . . are there any other patches?* He walked a little further and was rewarded by another patch of new wood. It formed an exact square.

"Your Grace?" a new voice asked.

Lightsong looked up to see the curt young priest he had spoken with the day before. Lightsong smiled. "Ah, good. I was hoping that you would come."

"This is most irregular, Your Grace," the man said.

"I hear that eating a lot of figs can cure you of that," Lightsong said. "Now, I need to speak with the guards who saw the intruder the other night."

"But why, Your Grace?" the priest said.

"Because I'm eccentric," Lightsong said. "Send for them. I need to speak to *all* of the servants or guards who saw the man who committed the murder."

"Your Grace," the priest said uncomfortably. "The city authorities have already dealt with this. They have determined that the intruder was a thief after Mercystar's art, and they have committed to—"

"Scoot," Lightsong said, turning. "Can this man ignore my demand?"

"Only at great peril to his soul, Your Grace," Llarimar said.

The priest eyed them both angrily, then turned and sent a servant to do

as Lightsong asked. Lightsong knelt down, causing several servants to whisper in alarm. They obviously thought it improper for a god to stoop.

Lightsong ignored them, looking at the square of new wood. It was larger than the other two that had been ripped up, and the colors matched far better. It was just a square patch of wood that was just a *slightly* different color than its neighbors. Without Breath—and a lot of it—he wouldn't even have noticed the distinction.

A trapdoor, he thought with sudden shock. The priest was watching him closely. *This patch isn't as new as the other ones back there. It's only new in relation to the other boards.*

Lightsong crawled along the floor, deliberately ignoring the door in the floor. Once again, unexpected instincts warned him not to reveal what he'd discovered. Why was he so wary all of a sudden? Was it the influence of his violent dreams and imagery from the painting earlier? Or was it something more? He felt as if he were dredging deep within himself, pulling forth an awareness he had never before needed.

Either way, he moved on from the patch, pretending that he hadn't noticed the trapdoor, and was instead searching for threads that might have been caught on the wood. He picked up one that had obviously come from a servant's robe and held it up.

The priest seemed to relax slightly.

So he knows about the trapdoor, Lightsong thought. *And . . . perhaps the intruder did as well?*

Lightsong crawled some more, discomforting the servants until the men he had requested were assembled. He stood—letting a couple of his servants dust off his robes—then walked over to the newcomers. The hallway was growing quite crowded, so he shooed them back out into the sunlight.

Outside, he regarded the group of six men. "Identify yourselves. You on the left, who are you?"

"My name is Gagaril," the man said.

"I'm sorry," Lightsong said.

The man flushed. "I was named after my father, Your Grace."

"After he what? Spent an unusual amount of time at the local tavern? Anyway, how are you involved in this mess?"

"I was one of the guards at the door when the intruder broke in."

"Were you alone?" Lightsong asked.

"No," said another of the men. "I was with him."

"Good," Lightsong said. "You two, go over there somewhere." He waved his hand at the lawn. The men looked at each other, then walked away as indicated.

"Far enough that you can't hear us!" Lightsong called at them.

The men nodded and continued.

"All right," Lightsong said, looking back at the others. "Who are you four?"

"We were attacked by the man in the hallway," one of the servants said. He pointed at two of the others. "All three of us. And . . . one other. The man who was killed."

"Terribly unfortunate, that," Lightsong said, pointing at another section of the lawn. "Off you go. Walk until you can't hear me anymore, then wait."

The three men trudged off.

"And now you," Lightsong said, hands on hips, regarding the last man—a shorter priest.

"I saw the intruder flee, Your Grace," the priest said. "I was watching out a window."

"Very timely of you," Lightsong said, pointing at a third spot on the lawn, far enough from the others to be sequestered. The man walked away. Lightsong turned back to the priest who was obviously in charge.

"You said that the intruder released a Lifeless animal?" Lightsong asked.

"A squirrel, Your Grace," the priest said. "We captured it."

"Go and fetch it for me."

"Your Grace, it's quite wild and—" He stopped, recognizing the look in Lightsong's eyes, then waved for a servant.

"No," Lightsong said. "Not a servant. You go and get it personally."

The priest looked incredulous.

"Yes, yes," Lightsong said, waving him away. "I know. It's an offense to your dignity. Perhaps you should think about converting to Austrism. For now, get going."

The priest left, grumbling.

"The rest of you," Lightsong said, addressing his own servants and priests. "You wait here."

They looked resigned. Perhaps they were growing accustomed to him dismissing them.

"Come on, Scoot," Lightsong said, walking toward the first group he had sent off onto the lawn—the two guards. Llarimar scurried forward to keep up as Lightsong took long strides over to the two men. "Now," Lightsong said to the two, out of earshot of the others, "tell me what you saw."

"He came to us pretending to be a madman, Your Grace," one of the guards said. "He sauntered out of the shadows, mumbling to himself. It was just an act, though, and when he got close enough, he knocked us both out."

"How?" Lightsong asked.

"He grabbed me around the neck with tassels from his Awakened coat," one of the men said. He nodded to his companion. "Knocked him in the stomach with the hilt of a sword."

The second guard raised his shirt to show a large bruise on his stomach, then cocked his head to the side, showing another one on his neck.

"Choked us both," the first guard said. "Me with those tassels, Fran with a boot on his neck. That's the last thing we knew. By the time we awoke, he was gone."

"He choked you," Lightsong said, "but didn't kill you. Just enough to knock you out?"

"That's right, Your Grace," the guard said.

"Please describe this man," Lightsong said.

"He was big," the guard said. "Had a scraggly beard. Not too long, but not trimmed either."

"He wasn't smelly or dirty," the other said. "He just didn't seem to take much care for how he looked. His hair was long—came down to his neck—and hadn't seen a brush in a long while."

"Wore ragged clothing," the first said. "Patched in places, nothing bright, but not really dark either. Just kind of . . . bland. Rather un-Hallandren, now that I think on it."

"And he was armed?" Lightsong said.

"With the sword that hit me," the second guard said. "Big thing. Not a dueling blade, more like an Easterner sword. Straight and really long. Had it hidden under his cloak, and we would have seen it, if he hadn't covered it up by walking so oddly."

Lightsong nodded. "Thank you. Stay here."

With that, he turned and walked toward the second group.

"This is very interesting, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "But I really don't see the point."

"I'm just curious," Lightsong said.

"Excuse me, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "But you're not really the curious type."

Lightsong continued walking. The things he was doing, he did mostly without thinking. They just felt natural. He approached the next group. "You were the ones who saw the intruder in the hallway, right?" Lightsong said to them.

The men nodded. One shot a glance back at Mercystar's palace. The lawn in front of it was now crowded with a colorful assortment of priests and servants, both Mercystar's and Lightsong's own.

"Tell me what happened," Lightsong said.

"We were walking through the servants' hallway," one said. "We'd been released for the evening, and were going to go out into the city to a nearby tavern."

"Then we saw someone in the hallway," another said. "He didn't belong there."

"Describe him," Lightsong said.

"Big man," one said. The others nodded. "Had ragged clothing and a beard. Kind of dirty-looking."

"No," another said. "The clothing was old, but the man wasn't dirty. Just slovenly."

Lightsong nodded. "Continue."

"Well, there isn't much to say," one of the men said. "He attacked us. Threw an Awakened rope at poor Taff, who got tied up immediately. Rariv and I ran for help. Lolan stayed behind."

Lightsong looked at the third man. "You stayed back? Why?"

"To help Taff, of course," the man said.

Lying, Lightsong thought. *Looks too nervous.* "Really?" he said, stepping closer.

The man looked down. "Well, mostly. I mean, there was the sword, too . . ."

"Oh, right," another said. "He threw a sword at us. Strangest thing."

"He didn't draw it?" Lightsong asked. "He *threw* it?"

The men shook their heads. "He threw it at us, sheath and all. Lolan picked it up."

"I thought I'd fight him," Lolan said.

"Interesting," Lightsong said. "So you two left?"

"Yeah," one of the men said. "When we came back with the others—after getting around that blasted squirrel—we found Lolan on the ground, unconscious, and poor Taff . . . well, he was still tied up, though the rope wasn't Awakened anymore. He'd been stabbed straight through."

"You saw him die?"

"No," Lolan said, bringing his hands up in denial. He had—Lightsong noticed—a bandage on one hand. "The intruder knocked me out with a fist to the head."

"But you had the sword," Lightsong said.

"It was too big to use," the man said, looking down.

"So he threw the sword at you, then ran up and *punched* you?" Lightsong said.

The man nodded.

"And your hand?" Lightsong asked.

The man paused, unconsciously retracting his hand. "It got twisted. Nothing important."

"And you need a bandage for a twisted wrist?" Lightsong said, raising an eyebrow. "Show me."

The man hesitated.

"Show me, or lose your soul, my son," Lightsong said in what he hoped was a suitably divine voice.

The man slowly extended his hand. Llarimar stepped forward and removed the bandage.

The hand was completely grey, drained of color.

Impossible, Lightsong thought with shock. *Awakening doesn't do that to living flesh. It can't draw color from someone alive, only objects. Floor boards, clothing, furniture.*

The man withdrew his hand.

"What is that?" Lightsong asked.

"I don't know," the man said. "I woke up, and it was like that."

"Is that so?" Lightsong said flatly. "And I'm to believe that you had nothing else to do with this? That you weren't working with the intruder?"

The man fell to his knees suddenly, beginning to cry. "Please, my lord! Don't take my soul. I'm not the best of men. I go to the brothels. I cheat when we gamble."

The other two looked startled at this.

"But I didn't know anything about this intruder," Lolan continued. "Please, you have to believe me. I just wanted that sword. That beautiful, black sword! I wanted to draw it, swing it, attack the man with it. I reached for it and while I was distracted, he attacked me. But I didn't see him kill Taff! I promise, I hadn't ever seen this intruder before! You have to believe me!"

Lightsong paused. "I do," he finally said. "Let this be a warning. Be good. Stop cheating."

"Yes, my lord."

Lightsong nodded to the men, then he and Llarimar left them behind.

"I actually kind of feel like a god," Lightsong said. "Did you see me make that man repent?"

"Amazing, Your Grace," Llarimar said.

"So what do you think about their testimonies?" Lightsong said. "Something strange *is* going on, isn't it?"

"I'm still wondering why you think you should be the one to investigate it, Your Grace."

"It's not like I have anything else to do."

"Besides be a god."

"Overrated," Lightsong said, walking up to the final man. "It has nice perks, but the hours are awful."

Llarimar snorted quietly as Lightsong turned to address the final witness, the short priest who stood in his robes of yellow and gold. He was distinctly younger than the other priest.

Was he chosen to tell me lies with the hopes that he'd seem innocent? Lightsong wondered idly. *Or am I just making assumptions?* "What is your story?" Lightsong asked.

The young priest bowed. "I was going about my duties, carrying to the records sanctuary several prophecies we had inscribed from the Lady's mouth. I heard a distant disturbance in the building. I looked out the window toward the sound, but I saw nothing."

"Where were you?" Lightsong asked.

The young man pointed toward a window. "There, Your Grace."

Lightsong frowned. The priest been on the opposite side of the palace from where the killing had occurred. However, that *was* the side of the building where the intruder had first entered. "You could see the doorway where the intruder disabled the two guards?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the man said. "Though I didn't see them at first. I almost left the window to search for the source of the noise. However, at that point I *did* see something odd in the lantern light of the entryway: a figure moving. It was then that I noticed the guards on the ground. I thought they were dead bodies, and I was frightened by the shadowy figure moving between them. I yelled, and ran for help. By the time anyone paid attention to me, the figure was gone."

"You went down to look for him?" Lightsong asked.

The man nodded.

"And how long did it take you?"

"Several minutes, Your Grace."

Lightsong nodded slowly. "Very well, then. Thank you."

The young priest began to walk over to the main group of his colleagues.

"Oh, wait," Lightsong said. "Did you, by any chance, get a clean look at the intruder?"

"Not really, Your Grace," the priest said. "He was in dark clothing, kind of nondescript. It was too far away to see well."

Lightsong waved the man away. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then eyed Llarimar. "Well?"

The priest raised an eyebrow. "Well what, Your Grace?"

"What do you think?"

Llarimar shook his head. "I . . . honestly don't know, Your Grace. This is obviously important, however."

Lightsong paused. "It is?"

Llarimar nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. Because of what that man said—the one who was wounded in the hand. He mentioned a black sword. You predicted it, remember? In the painting this morning?"

"That wasn't a prediction," Lightsong said. "That was really there, in the painting."

"That's the way prophecy works, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "Don't you see? You look at a painting and an entire image appears to your eyes. All I see

is random strokes of red. The scene you describe—the things you see—are prophetic. You are a god."

"But I saw exactly what the painting was said to depict!" Lightsong said. "Before you even told me what the title was!"

Llarimar nodded knowingly, as if that proved his point.

"Oh, never mind. Priests! Insufferable fanatics, every one of you. Either way, you agree with me that there is something strange here."

"Definitely, Your Grace."

"Good," Lightsong said. "Then you'll kindly stop complaining when I investigate it."

"Actually, Your Grace," Llarimar said, "it's even *more* imperative that you *not* get involved. You predicted this would occur, but you are an oracle. You must not interact with the subject of your predictions. If you get involved, you could unbalance a great many things."

"I like being unbalanced," Lightsong said. "Besides, this is *far* too much fun."

As usual, Llarimar didn't react to having his advice ignored. As they began to walk back toward the main group, however, the priest did ask a question. "Your Grace. Just to sate my own curiosity, what do *you* think about the murder?"

"It's obvious," Lightsong said idly. "There were two intruders. The first is the large man with the sword—he knocked out the guards, attacked those servants, released the Lifeless, then disappeared. The second man—the one the young priest saw—came in after the first intruder. That second man is the murderer."

Llarimar frowned. "Why do you suppose that?"

"The first man took care not to kill," Lightsong said. "He left the guards alive at risk to himself, since they could have regained consciousness at any moment to raise the alarm. He didn't draw his sword against the servants but simply tried to subdue them. There was no reason for him to kill a bound captive—particularly since he'd already left witnesses. If there were a second man, however . . . well, that would make sense. The servant who was killed, he was the one who was conscious when this second intruder came through. That servant was the only one who *saw* the second intruder."

"So, you think someone else followed the man with the sword, killed the only witness, and then . . ."

"Both of them vanished," Lightsong said. "I found a trapdoor. I'm thinking there must be passages beneath the palace. It all seems fairly obvious to me. One thing, however, is *not* obvious." He glanced at Llarimar, slowing before they reached the main group of priests and servants.

"And what is that, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked.

"How in the name of the Colors I figured all of this out!"

"I'm trying to grasp that myself, Your Grace."

Lightsong shook his head. "This comes from before, Scoot. Everything I'm doing, it feels *natural*. Who was I before I died?"

"I don't know what you mean, Your Grace," Llarimar said, turning away.

"Oh, come now, Scoot. I've spent most of my Returned life just lounging about, but then the *moment* someone is killed, I leap out of bed and can't resist poking around. Doesn't that sound suspicious to you?"

Llarimar didn't look at him.

"Colors!" Lightsong swore. "I was someone *useful*? I was just beginning to convince myself that I'd died in a reasonable way—such as falling off a stump when I was drunk."

"You know you died in a brave way, Your Grace."

"It could have been a really high stump."

Llarimar just shook his head. "Either way, Your Grace, you know I can't say anything about who you were before."

"Well, these instincts came from somewhere," Lightsong said as they walked over to the main group of watching priests and servants. The head priest had returned with a small wooden box. Wild scratching came from inside. "Thank you," Lightsong snapped, grabbing the box and passing by without even breaking stride. "I'm telling you, Scoot, I am *not* pleased."

"You seemed rather happy this morning, Your Grace," Llarimar noted as they walked away from Mercystar's palace. Her priest was left behind, a complaint dying on his lips, Lightsong's entourage trailing after their god.

"I was happy," Lightsong said, "because I didn't know what was going on. How am I going to be properly indolent if I keep itching to investigate things? Honestly, this murder will completely destroy my hard-won reputation."

"My sympathies, Your Grace, that you have been inconvenienced by a semblance of motivation."

"Quite right," Lightsong said, sighing. He handed over the box with its furious Lifeless rodent. "Here. You think my Awakeners can break its security phrase?"

"Eventually," Llarimar said. "Though it's an animal, Your Grace. It won't be able to tell us anything directly."

"Have them do it anyway," Lightsong said. "Meanwhile, I need to think about this case some more."

They walked back to his palace. However, the thing that now struck Lightsong was the fact that he'd used the word "case" in reference to the murder. It was a word he'd never heard used in that particular context. Yet he knew that it fit. Instinctively, automatically.

I didn't have to learn to speak again when I Returned, he thought. *I didn't have to learn to walk again, or read again, or anything like that. Only my personal memory was lost.*

But not all of it, apparently.

And that left him wondering what else he could do, if he tried.

27

Something happened to those previous God Kings, Siri thought, striding through the endless rooms of the God King's palace, her servants scurrying behind. *Something that Bluefingers fears will happen to Susebron. It will be dangerous to both the God King and myself.*

She continued to walk, trailing a train made from countless tassels of translucent green silk behind her. The day's gown was nearly gossamer thin—she'd chosen it, then had asked her servants to fetch an opaque slip for her. It was funny how quickly she'd stopped worrying about what was "ostentatious" and what was not.

There were many much more important problems to worry about.

The priests do *fear that something will happen to Susebron,* she thought firmly. *They are so eager for me to produce an heir. They claim it's about the succession, but they went fifty years without bothering. They were willing to wait twenty years to get their bride from Idris. Whatever the danger is, it's not urgent.*

And yet the priests act like it is.

Perhaps they'd wanted a bride of the royal line so badly that they'd been willing to risk the danger. Surely they needn't have waited twenty years, though. Vivenna could have borne children years ago.

Though perhaps the treaty specified a time and not an age. Maybe it just said that the king of Idris had twenty years to provide a bride for the God King. That would explain why her father had been able to send Siri instead.

Siri cursed herself for ignoring her lessons about the treaty. She didn't really know *what* it said. For all she knew, the danger could be spelled out in the document itself.

She needed more information. Unfortunately, the priests were obstructive, the servants silent, and Bluefingers, well . . .

She finally caught sight of him moving through one of the rooms, writing on his ledger. Siri hurried up, train rustling. He turned, glimpsing her. His eyes opened wide, and he increased his speed, ducking through the open doorway into another room. Siri called after him, moving as quickly as the dress would allow, but when she arrived, the room was empty.

"Colors!" she swore, feeling her hair grow a deep red in annoyance. "You still think he isn't avoiding me?" she demanded, turning to the most senior of her servants.

The woman lowered her gaze. "It would be improper for a servant of the palace to avoid his queen, Vessel. He must not have seen you."

Right, Siri thought, *just like every other time.* When she sent for him, he always arrived after she'd given up and left. When she had a letter scribed to him, he responded so vaguely that it only frustrated her even further.

She couldn't take books from the palace library, and the priests were disruptively distracting if she tried to read inside the library chamber itself. She'd requested books from the city, but the priests had insisted that they be brought by a priest, then read to her, so as to not "strain her eyes." She was pretty sure that if there was anything in the book that the priests didn't want her to know, the reader would simply skip it.

She depended so much upon the priests and scribes for everything, including information.

Except . . . she thought, still standing in the bright red room. There *was* another source of information. She turned to her head servant. "What activities are going on today in the courtyard?"

"Many, Vessel," the woman said. "Some artists have come and are doing paintings and sketches. There are some animal handlers showing exotic creatures from the South—I believe they have both elephants and zebras on display. There are also several dye merchants showing off their newest color combinations. And—of course—there are minstrels."

"What about at that building we went to before?"

"The arena, Vessel? I believe there will be games there later in the evening. Contests of physical prowess."

Siri nodded. "Prepare a box. I want to attend."

BACK IN HER HOMELAND, Siri had occasionally watched running contests. They were usually spontaneous, as the monks did not approve of men showing off. Austre gave all men talents. Flaunting them was seen as arrogance.

Boys cannot be so easily contained. She had seen them run, had even encouraged them. Those contests, however, had been *nothing* like what the Hallandren men now put on.

There were a half-dozen different events going on at once. Some men threw large stones, competing for distance. Others raced in a wide circle around the interior of the arena floor, kicking up sand, sweating heavily in the muggy Hallandren heat. Others tossed javelins, shot arrows, or engaged in leaping contests.

Siri watched with a deepening blush—one that ran all the way to the ends of her hair. The men wore only loincloths. During her weeks in the grand city, she had never seen anything quite so . . . interesting.

A lady shouldn't stare at young men, her mother had taught. *It's unseemly.*

Yet what was the point, if not to stare? Siri couldn't help herself, and it wasn't just because of the naked skin. These were men who had trained extensively—who had mastered their physical abilities to wondrous effect. As Siri watched, she saw that relatively little regard was given to the winners of each particular event. The contests weren't really about victory, but about the skill required to compete.

In that respect, these contests were almost in line with Idris sensibilities—yet, at the same time, they were ironically opposite.

The beauty of the games kept her distracted for much longer than she'd intended, her hair permanently locked into a deep maroon blush, even after she got used to the idea of men competing in so little clothing. Eventually, she forced herself to stand and turn away from the performance. She had work to do.

Her servants perked up. They had brought all kinds of luxuries. Full couches and cushions, fruits and wines, even a few men with fans to keep her

cool. After only a few weeks in the palace, such comfort was beginning to seem commonplace to her.

"There was a god who came and spoke to me before," Siri said, scanning the amphitheater, where many of the stone boxes were decorated with colorful canopies. "Which one was it?"

"Lightsong the Bold, Vessel," one of the serving women said. "God of bravery."

Siri nodded. "And his colors are?"

"Gold and red, Vessel."

Siri smiled. His canopy showed that he was there. He wasn't the only god to have introduced himself to her during her weeks in the palace, but he *was* the only one who had spent any amount of time chatting with her. He'd been confusing, but at least he'd been willing to talk. She left her box, beautiful dress trailing on the stone. She'd had to force herself to stop feeling guilty for ruining them, since apparently each dress was burned the day after she wore it.

Her servants burst into frantic motion, gathering up furniture and foods, following behind Siri. As before, there were people on the benches below—merchants rich enough to buy entrance to the court or peasants who had won a special lottery. Many turned and looked up as she passed, whispering among themselves.

It's the only way they get to see me, she realized. *Their queen.*

That was one thing that Idris certainly handled better than Hallandren. The Idrians had easy access to their king and their government, while in Hallandren the leaders were kept aloof—and therefore made remote, even mysterious.

She approached the red and gold pavilion. The god she had seen before lounged inside, relaxing on a couch, sipping from a large, beautifully engraved glass cup filled with an icy red liquid. He looked much as he had before—the chiseled masculine features that she was already coming to associate with godhood, perfectly styled black hair, golden tan skin, and a distinctly blasé attitude.

That's something else Idris was right about, she thought. *My people may be too stern, but it also isn't good to become as self-indulgent as some of these Returned.*

The god, Lightsong, eyed her and nodded in deference. "My queen."

"Lightsong the Bold," she said as one of her servants brought her chair. "I trust your day has been pleasant?"

"So far this day I have discovered several disturbing and redefining elements of my soul which are slowly restructuring the very nature of my existence." He took a sip from his drink. "Other than that, it was uneventful. You?"

"Fewer revelations," Siri said, sitting. "More confusion. I'm still inexperienced in the way things work here. I was hoping you could answer some of my questions, give me some information, perhaps . . ."

"Afraid not," Lightsong said.

Siri paused, then flushed, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong. I—"

"No, nothing wrong, child," Lightsong said, his smile deepening. "The reason I cannot help you is because I, unfortunately, know nothing. I'm useless. Haven't you heard?"

"Um . . . I'm afraid I haven't."

"You should pay better attention," he said, raising his cup toward her. "Shame on you," he said, smilingly.

Siri frowned, growing more embarrassed. Lightsong's high priest—distinguished by his oversized headgear—looked on disapprovingly, and that only caused her to be more self-conscious. *Why should I be the ashamed one?* she thought, growing annoyed. *Lightsong is the one who is making veiled insults against me—and making overt ones against himself! It's like he* enjoys *self-deprecation.*

"Actually," Siri said, looking over at him, lifting her chin, "I *have* heard of your reputation, Lightsong the Bold. 'Useless' wasn't the word I heard used, however."

"Oh?" he said.

"No. I was told you were harmless, though I can see that is not true—for in speaking to you, my sense of reason has certainly been harmed. Not to mention my head, which is beginning to ache."

"Both common symptoms of dealing with me, I'm afraid," he said with an exaggerated sigh.

"That could be solved," Siri said. "Perhaps it would help if you refrained from speaking when others are present. I think I should find you quite amiable in those circumstances."

Lightsong laughed. Not a belly laugh, like her father or some of the men back in Idris, but a more refined laugh. Still, it seemed genuine.

"I *knew* I liked you, girl," he said.

"I'm not sure if I should feel complimented or not."

"Depends upon how seriously you take yourself," Lightsong said. "Come, abandon that silly chair and recline on one of these couches. Enjoy the evening."

"I'm not sure that would be proper," Siri said.

"I'm a god," Lightsong said with a wave of his hand. "I define propriety."

"I think I'll sit anyway," Siri said, smiling, though she did stand and have her servants bring the chair farther under the canopy so that she didn't have to speak so loudly. She also tried not to pay too much attention to the contests, lest she be drawn in by them again.

Lightsong smiled. He seemed to enjoy making others uncomfortable. But, then, he also seemed to have no concern for how he himself appeared.

"I meant what I said before, Lightsong," she said. "I need information."

"And I, my dear, was quite honest as well. I *am* useless, mostly. However, I'll try my best to answer your questions—assuming, of course, you will provide answers to mine."

"And if I don't know the answers to your questions?"

"Then make something up," he said. "I'll never know the difference. Unknowing ignorance is preferable to informed stupidity."

"I'll try to remember that."

"Do so and you defeat the point. Now, your questions?"

"What happened to the previous God Kings?"

"Died," Lightsong said. "Oh, don't look so surprised. It happens to people sometimes, even gods. We make, if you haven't noticed, laughable immortals. We keep forgetting about that 'live forever' part and instead find ourselves unexpectedly dead. And for the *second time* at that. You might say that we're twice as bad at staying alive as regular folk."

"How do the God Kings die?"

"Gave away their Breath," Lightsong said. "Isn't that right, Scoot?"

Lightsong's high priest nodded. "It is, Your Grace. His Divine Majesty Susebron the Fourth died to cure the plague of distrentia that struck T'Telir fifty years ago."

"Wait," Lightsong said. "Isn't distrentia a disease of the bowels?"

"Indeed," the high priest said.

Lightsong frowned. "You mean to tell me that our God King—the most holy and divine personage in our pantheon—died to cure a few tummy aches?"

"I wouldn't exactly put it that way, Your Grace."

Lightsong leaned over to Siri. "I'm expected to do that someday, you know. Kill myself so that some old lady will be able to stop messing herself in public. No wonder I'm such an embarrassing god. Must have to do with subconscious self-worth issues."

The high priest looked apologetically at Siri. For the first time, she realized that the overweight priest's disapproval wasn't directed at her, but at his god. To her, he smiled.

Maybe they're not all like Treledees, she thought, smiling back.

"The God King's sacrifice was not an empty gesture, Vessel," the priest said. "True, diarrhea may not be a great danger to most, but to the elderly and the young it can be quite deadly. Plus, the epidemic conditions were spreading other diseases, and the city's commerce—and therefore the kingdom's—had slowed to a crawl. People in outlying villages went months without necessary supplies."

"I wonder how those who were cured felt," Lightsong said musingly, "waking to find their God King dead."

"One would think they'd be honored, Your Grace."

"I think they'd be annoyed. The king came all that way, and they were too sick to notice. Anyway, my queen, there you go. That was actually helpful information. You now have me worried that I've broken my promise to you about being useless."

"If it's any consolation," she said, "you weren't all that helpful yourself. It's your priest who actually seems useful."

"Yes, I know. I've tried for years to corrupt him. Never seems to work. I can't even get him to acknowledge the theological paradox it causes when I try to tempt him to do evil."

Siri paused, then found herself smiling even more broadly.

"What?" Lightsong asked, then finished off the last of his drink. It was immediately replaced by another, this one blue.

"Talking to you is like swimming in a river," she said. "I keep getting pulled along with the current and I'm never sure when I'll be able to take another breath."

"Watch out for the rocks, Vessel," the high priest noted. "They look rather insignificant, but have sharp edges under the surface."

"Bah," Lightsong said. "It's the *crocodiles* you have to watch for. They can bite. And . . . what exactly were we talking about, anyway?"

"The God Kings," Siri said. "When the last one died, an heir had already been produced?"

"Indeed," the high priest said. "In fact, he had just been married the year before. The child was born only weeks before he died."

Siri sat back in her chair, thoughtful. "And the God King before him?"

"Died to heal the children of a village which had been attacked by bandits," Lightsong said. "The commoners love the story. The king was so moved by their suffering that he gave himself up for the simple people."

"And had he been married the year before?"

"No, Vessel," the high priest said. "It was several years after his marriage. Though, he *did* die only a month after his second child was born."

Siri looked up. "Was the first child a daughter?"

"Yes," the priest said. "A woman of no divine powers. How did you know?"

Colors! Siri thought. *Both times, right after the heir was born.* Did having a child somehow make the God Kings wish to give their lives away? Or was it something more sinister? A cured plague or healed village were both things that, with a little creative propaganda, could be invented to cover up some other cause of death.

"I'm not truly an expert on these things, I'm afraid, Vessel," the high priest continued. "And, I'm afraid that Lord Lightsong is not either. If you press him, he *could* very well just start making things up."

"Scoot!" Lightsong said indignantly. "That's slanderous. Oh, and by the way, your hat is on fire."

"Thank you," Siri said. "Both of you. This has actually been rather helpful."

"If I might suggest . . ." the high priest said.

"Please," she replied.

"Try a professional storyteller, Vessel," the priest said. "You can order one in from the city, and he can recite both histories and tales of imagination to you. They will provide much better information than we can."

Siri nodded. *Why can't the priests in our palace be this helpful?* Of course, if they really *were* covering up the true reason their God Kings died, they

had good reason to avoid helping her. In fact, it was likely that if she asked for a storyteller, they would just provide one who would tell her what *they* wanted her to hear.

She frowned. "Could . . . you do that for me, Lightsong?"

"What?"

"Order in a storyteller," she said. "I should like you to be there, in case I have any questions."

Lightsong shrugged. "I guess I could. Haven't heard a storyteller in some time. Just let me know when."

It wasn't a perfect plan. Her servants were listening and they might report to the priests. However, if the storyteller came to Lightsong's palace, there was at least some chance of Siri hearing the truth.

"Thank you," she said, rising.

"Ah, ah, ah! Not so fast," Lightsong said, raising a finger.

She stopped.

He drank from his cup.

"Well?" she finally asked.

He held up the finger again as he continued to drink, tipping his head back, getting the last bits of slushy ice from the bottom of the cup. He set it aside, mouth blue. "How refreshing. Idris. Wonderful place. Lots of ice. Costs quite a bit to bring it here, so I've heard. Good thing I don't ever have to pay for anything, eh?"

Siri raised an eyebrow. "And I'm standing here waiting because . . ."

"You promised to answer some of *my* questions."

"Oh," she said, sitting back down. "Of course."

"Now, then," he said. "Did you know any city guards back in your home?"

She cocked her head. "City guards?"

"You know, fellows who enforce the law. Police. Sheriffs. The men who catch crooks and guard dungeons. That sort."

"I knew a couple, I guess," she said. "My home city wasn't large but it was the capital. It did attract people who could be difficult sometimes."

"Ah, good," Lightsong said. "Kindly describe them for me. Not the difficult fellows. The city watch."

Siri shrugged. "I don't know. They tended to be careful. They'd interview newcomers to the village, walk the streets looking for wrongdoing, that sort of thing."

"Would you call them inquisitive types?"

"Yes," Siri said. "I guess. I mean, as much as anybody. Maybe more."

"Were there ever any murders in your village?"

"A couple," Siri said, glancing down. "There shouldn't have been—my father always said things like that shouldn't happen in Idris. Said murder was a thing of . . . well, Hallandren."

Lightsong chuckled. "Yes, we do it all the time. Quite the party trick. Now, did these policemen investigate the murders?"

"Of course."

"Without having to be asked to do so?"

Siri nodded.

"How'd they go about it?"

"I don't know," Siri said. "They asked questions, talked to witnesses, looked for clues. I wasn't involved."

"No, no," Lightsong said. "Of course you weren't. Why, if you'd been a murderer, they would have done something terrible to you, yes? Like exile you to another country?"

Siri felt herself pale, hair growing lighter.

Lightsong just laughed. "Don't go taking me so seriously, Your Majesty. Honestly, I gave up wondering if you were an assassin *days* ago. Now, if your servants and mine will stay behind for a second, I think I may have something important to tell you."

Siri started as Lightsong stood up. He began to walk from the pavilion, and his servants remained where they were. Confused but excited, Siri rose from her own seat and hurried after him. She caught up with him a short distance away, on the stone walkway that ran between the various boxes in the arena. Down below, the athletes continued their display.

Lightsong looked down at her, smiling.

They really are tall, she thought, craning a bit. A single foot of extra height made such a difference. Standing next to a man like Lightsong—and not really being that tall herself—she felt dwarfed. *Maybe he'll tell me the thing I've been looking for,* Siri thought. *The secret!*

"You are playing a dangerous game, my queen," Lightsong said, leaning against the stone railing. It was built for Returned proportions, so it was too high for her to rest against comfortably.

"Game?" she asked.

"Politics," he said, watching the athletes.

"I don't want to play politics."

"If you don't, it will play you, I'm afraid. I always get sucked in, regardless of what I do. Complaining doesn't stop that—though it does annoy people, which is satisfying in its own right."

Siri frowned. "So you pulled me aside to give me a warning?"

"Colors, no," Lightsong said, chuckling. "If you haven't already figured out that this is dangerous, then you're far too dense to appreciate a warning. I just wanted to give some advice. The first is about your persona."

"My persona?"

"Yes," he said. "It needs work. Choosing the persona of an innocent newcomer was a good instinct. It suits you. But you need to refine it. Work on it."

"It's not a persona," she said sincerely. "I *am* confused and new to all this."

Lightsong raised a finger. "That's the trick to politics, child. Sometimes, although you can't disguise who you are and how you really feel, you *can* make use of who you are. People distrust that which they can't understand and predict. As long as you feel like an unpredictable element in court, you will appear to be a threat. If you can skillfully—and honestly—portray yourself as someone they understand, then you'll begin to fit in. "

Siri frowned.

"Take me as an example," Lightsong said. "I'm a useless fool. I always have been, as long as I can remember—which actually isn't all that long. Anyway, I know how people regard me. I enhance it. Play with it."

"So it's a lie?"

"Of course not. This is who I am. However, I make certain that people never forget it. You can't control everything. But if you can control how people regard you, then you can find a place in this mess. And once you have that, you can begin to influence factions. Should you want to. I rarely do because it's such a bother."

Siri cocked her head. Then she smiled. "You're a good man, Lightsong," she said. "I knew it, even when you were insulting me. You mean no harm. Is that part of your persona?"

"Of course," he said, smiling. "But I'm not sure *what* it is that convinces people to trust me. I'd get rid of it if I could. It only serves to make people expect too much. Just give what I said some practice. The best thing about being locked in this beautiful prison is that you *can* do some good, you *can* change

things. I've seen others do it. People I respected. Even if there haven't been many of those around the court lately."

"All right," she said. "I will."

"You're digging for something—I can sense it. And it has to do with the priests. Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike. Sudden and surprising, that's how you want to be. You don't want to appear *too* nonthreatening—people are always suspicious of the innocent. The trick is to appear *average*. Just as crafty as everyone else. That way, everyone else will assume that they can beat you with just a little advantage."

Siri nodded. "Kind of an Idrian philosophy."

"You came from us," Lightsong said. "Or, perhaps, we came from you. Either way, we're more similar than our outward trappings make us seem. What is that Idrian philosophy of extreme plainness except a means of contrasting with Hallandren? All those whites you people use? That makes you stand out on a national scale. You act like us, we act like you, we just do the same things in opposite ways."

She nodded slowly.

He smiled. "Oh, and one thing. Please, *please* don't depend on me too much. I mean that. I'm not going to be of much help. If your plots come to a head—if things go wrong at the last moment and you're in danger or distress—don't think of me. I will fail you. *That* I promise from my heart with absolute sincerity."

"You're a very strange man."

"Product of my society," he said. "And since most of the time, my society consists pretty much only of myself, I blame god. Good day, my queen."

With that, he sauntered off back to his box and waved for her servants—who had been watching with concern—to finally rejoin her.

28

"The meeting is set, my lady," Thame said. "The men are eager. Your work in T'Telir is gaining more and more notoriety."

Vivenna wasn't sure what she thought of that. She sipped her juice. The lukewarm liquid was addictively flavorful, although she wished for some Idrian ice.

Thame looked at her eagerly. The short Idrian was, according to Denth's investigations, trustworthy enough. His story of being "forced" into a life of crime was a tad overstated. He filled a niche in Hallandren society—he acted as a liaison between the Idrian workers and the various criminal elements.

He was also, apparently, a staunch patriot. Despite the fact that he tended to exploit his own people, particularly newcomers to the city.

"How many will be at the meeting?" Vivenna asked, watching traffic pass on the street out beyond the restaurant's patio gate.

"Over a hundred, my lady," Thame said. "Loyal to our king, I promise. And, they're influential men, all of them—for Idrians in T'Telir, that is."

Which, according to Denth, meant that they were men who wielded power in the city because they could provide cheap Idrian workers and could sway the opinion of the underprivileged Idrian masses. They were men who, like Thame, thrived because of the Idrian expatriates. A strange duality. These men had stature among an oppressed minority, and without the oppression, they would be powerless.

Like Lemex, she thought, *who served my father—even seemed to respect and love him—all the while stealing every bit of gold he could lay his hands on.*

She leaned back, wearing a white dress with a long pleated skirt that rippled and blew in the wind. She tapped the side of her cup, which caused a serving man to refill her juice. Thame smiled, taking more juice as well, though he looked out of place in the fine restaurant.

"How many are there, you suppose?" she asked. "Idrians in the city, I mean."

"Perhaps as many as ten thousand."

"That many?"

"Trouble on the lower farms," Thame said, shrugging. "It's hard, sometimes, living up in those mountains. Crops fail, and what do you have? The king owns your land, so you can't sell. You need to pay your levies . . ."

"Yes, but one can petition in the case of disaster," Vivenna said.

"Ah, my lady, but most of these men are several weeks' travel from the king. Should they leave their families to make a petition, when they fear their loved ones will starve during the weeks it will take to bring food from the king's storehouse if they are successful? Or do they travel the much shorter distance down to T'Telir? Take work there, loading on the docks or harvesting flowers in the jungle plantations? It's hard work, but steady."

And, in doing so, they betray their people.

But who was she to judge? The Fifth Vision would define it as haughtiness. Here she sat in the cool shade of a canopy, enjoying a nice breeze and expensive juice while other men slaved to provide for their families. She had no right to sneer at their motivations.

Idrians shouldn't have to seek for work in Hallandren. She didn't like to admit fault in her father, yet his was not a bureaucratically efficient kingdom. It consisted of dozens of scattered villages with poor highways that were often blocked by snows or rockslides. In addition, he was forced to expend a lot of resources keeping his army strong in case of a Hallandren assault.

He had a difficult job. Was that a good enough excuse for the poverty of her people who had been forced to flee their homeland? The more she listened and learned, the more she realized that many Idrians had never known anything like the idyllic life she'd lived in her lovely mountain valley.

"Meeting is three days hence, my lady," Thame said. "Some of these men are hesitant after Vahr and his failure, but they will listen to you."

"I will be there."

"Thank you." Thame rose—bowed, despite the fact that she'd asked him not to draw attention to her—and withdrew.

Vivenna sat and sipped her juice. She felt Denth before he arrived. "You know what interests me?" he said, taking the seat Thame had been using.

"What?"

"People," he said, tapping an empty cup, drawing the serving man back over. "People interest me. Particularly people who don't act like they're supposed to. People who surprise me."

"I hope you aren't talking about Thame," Vivenna asked, raising an eyebrow.

Denth shook his head. "I'm talking about you, Princess. Wasn't too long ago that—no matter what or who you looked at—you had a look of quiet displeasure in your eyes. You've lost it. You're starting to fit in."

"Then that's a problem, Denth," Vivenna said. "I don't want to fit in. I hate Hallandren."

"You seem to like that juice all right."

Vivenna set it aside. "You're right, of course. I shouldn't be drinking it."

"If you say so," Denth said, shrugging. "Now, if you were to ask the mercenary—which, of course, nobody ever does—he might mention that it's *good* for you to start acting like a Hallandren. The less you stand out, the less likely people are to connect you to that Idrian princess hiding in the city. Take your friend Parlin."

"He looks like a fool in those bright colors," she said, glancing across the street toward where he and Jewels were chatting as they watched the escape route.

"Does he?" Denth said. "Or does he just look like a Hallandren? Would you hesitate at all if you were in the jungle and saw him put on the fur of a beast, or perhaps shroud himself in a cloak colored like fallen leaves?"

She looked again. Parlin lounged against the side of a building much like street toughs his age she'd seen elsewhere in the city.

"You both fit better here than you once did," Denth said. "You're learning."

Vivenna looked down. Some things in her new life were actually starting to feel natural. The raids, for instance, were becoming surprisingly easy. She

was also growing used to moving with the crowds and being part of an underground element. Two months earlier, she would have been indignantly opposed to dealing with a man like Denth, simply because of his profession.

She found it very difficult to reconcile herself to some of these changes. It was growing harder and harder to understand herself, and to decide what she believed.

"Though," Denth said, eyeing Vivenna's dress, "you might want to think about switching to trousers."

Vivenna frowned, looking up.

"Just a suggestion," Denth said, then gulped down some juice. "You don't like the short Hallandren skirts, but the only decent clothing we can buy you that are 'modest' are of foreign make—and that makes them expensive. That means we have to use expensive restaurants, lest we stand out. That means you have to deal with all of this terrible lavishness. Trousers, however, are modest *and* cheap."

"Trousers are *not* modest."

"Don't show knees," he said.

"Doesn't matter."

Denth shrugged. "Just giving my opinion."

Vivenna looked away, then sighed quietly. "I appreciate the advice, Denth. Really. I just . . . I'm confused by a lot of my life lately."

"World's a confusing place," Denth said. "That's what makes it fun."

"The men we're working with," Vivenna said. "They lead the Idrians in the city but exploit them at the same time. Lemex stole from my father but still worked for the interests of my country. And here I am, wearing an overpriced dress and sipping expensive juice while my sister is being abused by an awful dictator and while this wonderful, terrible city prepares to launch a war on my homeland."

Denth leaned back in his chair, looking out over the short railing toward the street, watching the crowds with their colors both beautiful and terrible. "The motivations of men. They never make sense. And they always make sense."

"Right now, *you* don't make sense."

Denth smiled. "What I'm trying to say is that you don't understand a man until you understand what makes him do what he does. Every man is a hero in his own story, Princess. Murderers don't believe that they're to

blame for what they do. Thieves, they think they deserve the money they take. Dictators, they believe they have the right—for the safety of their people and the good of the nation—to do whatever they wish."

He stared off, shaking his head. "I think even Vasher sees himself as a hero. The truth is, most people who do what you'd call 'wrong' do it for what they call 'right' reasons. Only mercenaries make any sense. We do what we're paid to do. That's it. Perhaps that's why people look down on us so. We're the only ones who don't pretend to have higher motives."

He paused, then met her eyes. "In a way, we're the most honest men you'll ever meet."

The two of them fell silent, the crowd passing by just a short distance away, a river of flashing colors. Another figure approached the table. "That's right," Tonk Fah said, "but, you forgot to mention that in addition to being honest, we're also clever. And handsome."

"Those both go without saying," Denth said.

Vivenna turned. Tonk Fah had been watching from nearby, ready to provide backup. They were letting her start to take the lead in some of the meetings. "Honest, perhaps," Vivenna said. "But I certainly *hope* that you're not the most handsome men I'll ever meet. Are we ready to go?"

"Assuming you're finished with your juice," Denth said, smirking at her.

Vivenna glanced at her cup. It was *very* good. Feeling guilty, she drained the juice. *It would be a sin to waste it,* she thought. Then she rose and swished her way from the building, leaving Denth—who now handled most of the coins—to settle the bill. Outside on the street, they were joined by Clod, who'd been given orders to come if she screamed for help.

She turned, looking back at Tonk Fah and Denth. "Tonks," she said. "Where's your monkey?"

He sighed. "Monkeys are boring anyway."

She rolled her eyes. "You lost *another* one?"

Denth chuckled. "Get used to it, Princess. Of all the happy miracles in the universe, one of the greatest is that Tonks has never fathered a child. He'd probably lose it before the week was out."

She shook her head. "You may be right," she said. "Next appointment. D'Denir garden, right?"

Denth nodded.

"Let's go," she said, walking down the street. The others trailed behind,

picking up Parlin and Jewels on the way. Vivenna didn't wait for Clod to force a way through the crowd. The less she depended on that Lifeless, the better. Moving through the streets really wasn't that difficult. There was an art to it—one moved with a crowd, rather than trying to swim against its flow. It wasn't long before, Vivenna at the front, the group turned off into the wide grassy field that was the D'Denir garden. Like the crossroads square, this place was an open space of green life set among the buildings and colors. Yet, here no flowers or trees broke the landscape, nor did people bustle about. This was a more reverent place.

And it was filled with statues. Hundreds of them. They looked much like the other D'Denir in the city—with their oversized bodies and heroic poses, many tied with colorful cloths or garments. These were some of the oldest statues she had seen, their stone weathered from years spent enduring the frequent T'Telir rainfalls. This group was the final gift from Peacegiver the Blessed. The statues had been made as a memorial to those who had died in the Manywar. A monument and a warning. So the legends said. Vivenna couldn't help thinking that if the people really did honor those that had fallen, they wouldn't dress the statues up in such ridiculous costumes.

Still, the place was far more serene than most in T'Telir, and she could appreciate that. She walked down the steps onto the lawn, wandering between the silent stone figures.

Denth moved up beside her. "Remember who we're meeting?"

She nodded. "Forgers."

Denth eyed her. "You all right with this?"

"Denth, during our months together I've met with thief lords, murderers, and—most frighteningly—mercenaries. I think I can deal with a couple of spindly scribes."

Denth shook his head. "These are the men who *sell* the documents, not the scribes who do the work. You won't meet more dangerous men than forgers. Within the Hallandren bureaucracy, they can make anything seem legal by putting the right documents in the right places."

Vivenna nodded slowly.

"You remember what to have them make?" Denth asked.

"Of course I do," she said. "This particular plan was *my* idea, remember?"

"Just checking," he said.

"You're worried that I'll mess things up, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "You're the leader in this little dance, Princess. I'm just the guy who mops the floor afterward." He eyed her. "I hate mopping up blood."

"Oh, please," she said, rolling her eyes, walking faster and leaving him behind. As he fell back, she could hear him talking to Tonk Fah. "Bad metaphor?" Denth asked.

"Nah," Tonk Fah said. "It had blood in it. That makes it a good metaphor."

"I think it lacked poetic style."

"Find something that rhymes with 'blood' then," Tonk Fah suggested. He paused. "Mud? Thud? Uh . . . tastebud?"

They sure are literate, for a bunch of thugs, she thought.

She didn't have to go far before she spotted the men. They waited beside the agreed meeting place—a large D'Denir with a weathered axe. The group of people were having a picnic and chatting among themselves, a picture of harmless innocence.

Vivenna slowed.

"That's them," Denth whispered. "Let's go sit beside the D'Denir across from them."

Jewels, Clod, and Parlin hung back while Tonk Fah strolled away to watch the perimeter. Vivenna and Denth approached the statue near the forgers. Denth spread out a blanket for her, then stood to the side, as if he were a manservant.

One of the men beside the other statue looked across as Vivenna sat down; then he nodded. The others continued to eat. The Hallandren underground's penchant for working in broad daylight still unnerved Vivenna, but she supposed it had advantages over skulking about at night.

"You want some work commissioned?" the forger closest to her asked, just loudly enough that Vivenna could hear. It almost seemed part of his conversation with his friends.

"Yes," she said.

"It costs."

"I can pay."

"You're the princess everyone is talking about?"

She paused, noticing Denth's hand leisurely going to his sword hilt.

"Yes," she said.

"Good," the forger said. "Royalty always seems to know how to handle itself. What is it you desire?"

"Letters," Vivenna said. "I want them to appear as if they were between certain members of the Hallandren priesthood and the king of Idris. They need to have official seals and convincing signatures."

"Difficult," the man said.

Vivenna pulled something from her dress pocket. "I have a letter written in King Dedelin's hand. It has his seal on the wax, his signature at the bottom."

The man seemed intrigued, though she could only see the side of his face. "That makes it possible. Still hard. What do you want these documents to prove?"

"That these particular priests are corrupt," Vivenna said. "I have a list on this sheet. I want you to make it look like they've been extorting Idris for years, forcing our king to pay outrageous sums and make extreme promises in order to prevent war. I want you to show that Idris doesn't want war and that the priests are hypocrites."

The man nodded. "Is that everything?"

"Yes."

"It can be done. We'll be in touch. Instructions and explanations are on the back of the paper?"

"As requested," Vivenna said.

The group of men stood, a servant moving forward to pack up their lunch. As he did so, he let a napkin blow in the wind, then rushed over and picked it up, grabbing Vivenna's paper too. Soon, all of them were gone.

"Well?" Vivenna asked, looking up.

"Good," Denth said, nodding to himself. "You're becoming an expert."

Vivenna smiled, settling back on her blanket to wait. The next appointment consisted of a group of thieves who had stolen—at Vivenna and Denth's request—various goods from the war offices in the Hallandren bureaucratic building. The documents were of relatively little import themselves, but their absence would cause confusion and frustration.

That appointment wasn't for a few hours, which meant she could enjoy some time relaxing on the lawn, away from the unnatural colors of the city. Denth seemed to sense her inclination, and he sat down, leaning back against

the side of the statue's bare pedestal. As Vivenna waited, she saw that Parlin was over talking to Jewels again. Denth was right; though his clothing looked ridiculous to her, that was because she *knew* him as an Idrian. Looking at him more objectively, she saw that he fit in remarkably well with other young men in the city.

That's well and good for him, Vivenna thought with annoyance, looking away. *He can dress as he wishes—he doesn't have to worry about his neckline or hemline.*

Jewels laughed. It was almost a snort of derision, but there was *some* mirth in it. Vivenna looked back immediately, watching Jewels roll her eyes at Parlin, a self-effacing smirk on his face. He knew he'd said something wrong. He didn't know what. Vivenna knew him well enough to read the expression and to know that he'd just smile and go along with it.

Jewels saw his face, then laughed again.

Vivenna gritted her teeth. "I should send him back to Idris," she said.

Denth turned, looking down at her. "Hum?"

"Parlin," she said. "I sent my other guides back. I should have sent him too. He serves no function."

"He's quick at adapting to situations," Denth said. "And he's trustworthy. That's good enough reason to keep him."

"He's a fool," Vivenna said. "Has trouble understanding half of what goes on around him."

"He's not got the wit of a scholar, true, but he seems to instinctively know how to blend in. Besides, we can't all be geniuses like you."

She glanced at Denth. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Denth said, "that you shouldn't let your hair change colors in public, Princess."

Vivenna started, noticing that her hair had shifted from a still, calm black to the red of frustration. *Lord of Colors!* she thought. *I used to be so good at controlling that. What is happening to me?*

"Don't worry," Denth said, settling back. "Jewels has *no* interest in your friend. I promise you."

Vivenna snorted. "Parlin? Why should I care?"

"Oh, I don't know," Denth said. "Maybe because you and he have been practically engaged since you were children?"

"That's completely untrue," Vivenna said. "I've been engaged to the God King since before my birth!"

"And your father always wished you could marry the son of his best friend instead," Denth said. "At least, that's what Parlin says." He eyed her with a smirk.

"That boy talks too much."

"Actually, he's usually rather quiet," Denth said. "You have to pry to get him to talk about himself. Either way, Jewels has other ties. So stop your worrying."

"I'm not worried," Vivenna said. "And I'm *not* interested in Parlin."

"Of course not."

Vivenna opened her mouth to object, but she noticed Tonk Fah wandering over, and didn't want *him* to join this discussion as well. She snapped her jaw shut as the hefty mercenary arrived.

"Flood," Tonk Fah said.

"Hum?" Denth asked.

"Rhymes with blood," Tonk Fah said. "Now you can be poetic. Flood of Blood. It is a nice visual image. Far better than tastebud."

"Ah, I see," Denth said flatly. "Tonk Fah?"

"Yes?"

"You're an idiot."

"Thanks."

Vivenna stood up and began to walk through the statues, studying them—if only to escape having to watch Parlin and Jewels. Tonk Fah and Denth trailed along behind at a comfortable distance, keeping a watchful eye.

There was a beauty to the statues. They weren't like the other kinds of art in T'Telir—flashy paintings, colorful buildings, exaggerated clothing. The D'Denir were solid blocks which had aged with dignity. The Hallandrens, of course, did their best to destroy this with the scarves, hats, or other colorful bits they tied on the stone memorials. Fortunately, there were too many in this garden for all to be decorated.

They stood, as if on guard, somehow more solid than much of the city. Most stared up into the sky or looked straight ahead. Each one was different, each pose distinct, each face unique. *It must have taken decades to create all of these,* she thought. *Perhaps that's where the Hallandren got their penchant for art.*

Hallandren was such a place of contradictions. Warriors to represent peace. Idrians who exploited and protected each other at the same time. Mercenaries who seemed to be among the best men she had ever known. Bright colors that created a kind of uniformity.

And, over it all, BioChromatic Breath. It was exploitive, yet people like Jewels saw giving up their Breath as a privilege. Contradictions. The question was, could Vivenna afford to become another contradiction? A person who bent her beliefs in order to see that they were preserved?

The Breaths *were* wonderful. It was more than just the beauty or the ability to hear changes in sound and sense intrinsically the distinct hues of color. It was more even than the ability to sense life around her. More than the sounds of the wind and the tones of people talking, or her ability to feel her way through a group of people and move easily with the motions of a crowd.

It was a connection. The world around her felt *close*. Even inanimate things like her clothing or fallen twigs felt near to her. They were dead, yet seemed to yearn for life again.

She could give it to them. They remembered life and she could Awaken those memories. But what good would it do to save her people if she lost herself?

Denth doesn't seem lost, she thought. *He and the other mercenaries can separate what they believe from what they are forced to do.*

In her opinion, that was why people regarded mercenaries as they did. If you divorced belief from action, then you were on dangerous ground.

No, she thought. *No Awakening for me.*

The Breath would remain untapped. If it tempted her too much further, she would give the lot away to somebody who had none.

And become a Drab herself.

29

Tell me about the mountains, Susebron wrote.

Siri smiled. "Mountains?"

Please, he wrote, sitting in his chair beside the bed. Siri lay on one side; her bulky dress had been too hot for this evening, so she sat in her shift with a sheet over her, resting on one elbow so she could see what he wrote. The fire crackled.

"I don't know what to tell you," she said. "I mean, the mountains aren't amazing like the wonders you have in T'Telir. You have so many colors, so much variety."

I think that rocks sticking from the ground and rising thousands of feet into the air count as a wonder, he wrote.

"I guess," she said. "I liked it in Idris—I didn't want to know anything else. For someone like you, though, it would probably be boring."

More boring than sitting in the same palace every day, not allowed to leave, not allowed to speak, being dressed and pampered?

"Okay, you win."

Tell me of them, please. His handwriting was getting very good. Plus, the more he wrote, the more he seemed to understand. She wished so much that she could find him books to read—she suspected that he'd absorb them quickly, becoming as learned as any of the scholars who had tried to tutor her.

And yet, all he had was Siri. He seemed to appreciate what she gave him—but that was probably only because he didn't know just how ignorant she was.

I suspect, she thought, *that my tutors would laugh themselves silly if they knew how much I'd come to regret ignoring them.*

"The mountains are vast," she said. "You can't really get a sense of it here, in the lowlands. It's by seeing them that you know just how insignificant people really are. I mean, no matter how long we worked and built, we could never pile up *anything* as high as one of the mountains.

"They're rocks, like you said, but they're not lifeless. They're green—as green as your jungles. But it's a different green. I heard some of the traveling merchants complain that the mountains cut off their view, but I think you can see *more.* They let you see the surface of the land as it extends upward, toward Austre's domain in the sky."

He paused. *Austre?*

Siri flushed, hair blushing as well. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't talk about other gods in front of you."

Other gods? he wrote. *Like those in the court?*

"No," Siri said. "Austre is the Idrian god."

I understand, Susebron wrote. *Is he very handsome?*

Siri laughed. "No, you don't understand. He's not a Returned, like you or Lightsong. He's . . . well, I don't know. Didn't the priests mention other religions to you?"

Other religions? he wrote.

"Sure," she said. "I mean, not everybody worships the Returned. The Idrians like me worship Austre, and the Pahn Kahl people—like Bluefingers . . . well, I don't actually know what they worship, but it's not you."

That is very strange to consider, he wrote. *If your gods are not Returned, then what are they?*

"Not they," Siri said. "Just one. We call him Austre. The Hallandren used to worship him too before . . ." She almost said before they became heretics. "Before Peacegiver arrived, and they decided to worship the Returned instead."

But who is this Austre? he wrote.

"He's not a person," Siri said. "He's more of a force. You know, the thing that watches over all people, who punishes those who don't do what is right and who blesses those who are worthy."

Have you met this creature?

Siri laughed. "Of course not. You can't see Austre."

Susebron frowned, looking at her.

"I know," she said. "It must seem silly to you. But, well, we know he's there. When I see something beautiful in nature—when I look at the mountains, with their wildflowers growing in patterns that are somehow more *right* than a man could have planted—I know. Beauty is real. That's what reminds me of Austre. Plus, we've got the Returned—including the First Returned, Vo. He had the Five Visions before he died, and they *must* have come from somewhere."

But you don't believe in worshiping the Returned?

Siri shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. My people teach strongly against it. They're not fond of the way that Hallandren understand religion."

He sat quietly for a long moment.

So . . . you do not like those such as me?

"What? Of course I like you! You're sweet!"

He frowned, writing. *I don't think God Kings are supposed to be "sweet."*

"Fine, then," she said, rolling her eyes. "You're terrible and mighty. Awesome and deific. And sweet."

Much better, he wrote, smiling. *I should very much like to meet this Austre.*

"I'll introduce you to some monks sometime," Siri said. "They should be able to help you with that."

Now you are mocking me.

Siri smiled as he looked up at her. There was no hurt in his eyes. He didn't appear to mind being mocked; indeed, he seemed to find it very interesting. He particularly liked trying to pick out when she was being serious and when she wasn't.

He looked down again. *More than meeting with this god, however, I should like to see the mountains. You seem to love them very much.*

"I do," Siri said. It had been a long time since she'd thought of Idris. But as he mentioned it, she remembered the cool, open feeling of the meadows she had run through not so long ago. The crispness of the chilly air—something that she suspected one could never find in Hallandren.

Plants in the Court of Gods were kept perfectly clipped, cultivated, and arranged. They were beautiful, but the wild fields of her homeland had their own special feel.

Susebron was writing again. *I suspect that the mountains are beautiful, as*

you have said. However, I believe the most beautiful thing in them has already come down to me.

Siri started, then flushed. He seemed so open, not even a little embarrassed or shy about the bold compliment. "Susebron!" she said. "You have the heart of a charmer."

Charmer? he wrote. *I must only speak what I see. There is nothing so wonderful as you, even in my entire court. The mountains must be special indeed, to produce such beauty.*

"See, now you've gone too far," she said. "I've *seen* the goddesses of your court. They're far more beautiful than I am."

Beauty is not about how a person looks, Susebron wrote. *My mother taught me this. The travelers in my storybook must not judge the old woman ugly, for she might be a beautiful goddess inside.*

"This isn't a story, Susebron."

Yes it is, he wrote. *All of those stories are just tales told by people who lived lives before ours. What they say about humankind is true. I have watched and seen how people act.* He erased, then continued. *It is strange, for me, to interpret these things, for I do not see as normal men do. I am the God King. Everything, to my eyes, has the same beauty.*

Siri frowned. "I don't understand."

I have thousands of Breaths, he wrote. *It is hard to see as other people do—only through the stories of my mother can I understand their ways. All colors are beauty in my eyes. When others look at something—a person—one may sometimes seem more beautiful than another.*

This is not so for me. I see only the color. The rich, wondrous colors that make up all things and gives them life. I cannot focus only on the face, as so many do. I see the sparkle of the eyes, the blush of the cheeks, the tones of skin—even each blemish is a distinct pattern. All people are wonderful.

He erased. *And so, when I speak of beauty, I must speak of things other than these colors. And you are different. I do not know how to describe it.*

He looked up, and suddenly Siri was aware of just how close they were to each other. She, only in her shift, with the thin sheet covering her. He, tall and broad, shining with a soul that made the colors of the sheets bend out like light through a prism. He smiled in the firelight.

Oh, dear . . . she thought. *This is dangerous.*

She cleared her throat, sitting up, flushing yet again. "Well. Um, yes. Very nice. Thank you."

He looked back down. *I wish I could let you go home, to see your mountains again. Perhaps I could explain this to the priests.*

She paled. "I don't think it would be good to let them know that you can read."

I could use the artisan's script. It is very difficult to write, but they taught it to me so I could communicate with them, if I needed to.

"Still," she said. "Telling them you want to send me home could hint that you've been talking to me."

He stopped writing for a few moments.

Maybe that would be a good thing, he wrote.

"Susebron, they're planning to *kill* you."

You have no proof of that.

"Well, it's suspicious, at least," she said. "The last two God Kings died within months of producing an heir."

You're too untrusting, Susebron wrote. *I keep telling you. My priests are good people.*

She regarded him flatly, catching his eyes.

Except for removing my tongue, he admitted.

"And keeping you locked up, and not telling you anything. Look, even if they aren't planning to kill you, they know things they're not telling you. Perhaps it's something to do with BioChroma—something that makes you die once your heir arrives."

She frowned, leaning back. *Could that be it?* she wondered suddenly. "Susebron, how do you pass on your Breaths?"

He paused. *I don't know,* he wrote. *I . . . don't know a lot about it.*

"I don't either," she said. "Can they take them from you? Give them to your son? What if that kills you?"

They wouldn't do that, he wrote.

"But maybe it's possible," she said. "And maybe that's what happens. That's why having a child is so dangerous! They have to make a new God King and it kills you to do so."

He sat with his board in his lap, then shook his head, writing. *I am a god. I am not given Breaths, I am born with them.*

"No," Siri said. "Bluefingers told me you'd been collecting them for centuries. That each God King gets two Breaths a week, instead of one, building up his reserves."

Actually, he admitted, *some weeks I get three or four.*

"But you only need one a week to survive."

Yes.

"And they can't let that wealth die with you! They're too afraid of it to let you use it, but they also can't let themselves lose it. So, when a new child is born, they take the Breath from the old king—killing him—and give it to the new one."

But Returned cannot use their Breath for Awakening, he wrote. *So my treasure of Breaths is useless.*

This gave her pause. She *had* heard that. "Does that mean only the Breath you're born with, or does it include the extra Breaths that have been added on top?"

I do not know, he wrote.

"I'll bet you could use those extra Breaths if you wanted," she said. "Otherwise, why remove your tongue? You may not be able to access and use that Breath that makes you Returned in the first place, but you have thousands and thousands of Breaths above that."

Susebron sat for a few moments, and then finally he rose, walking across to the window. He stared out at the darkness beyond. Siri frowned, then picked up his board and crossed the room. She got off the bed and approached hesitantly, wearing only her shift.

"Susebron?" she asked.

He continued to stare out the window. She joined him, careful not to touch him, looking out. Colorful lights sparkled amidst the city beyond the wall of the Court of Gods. Beyond that was darkness. The still sea.

"Please," she said, pushing the board into his hands. "What is it?"

He paused, then took it. *I am sorry,* he wrote. *I do not wish to appear petulant.*

"Is it because I keep challenging your priests?"

No, he wrote. *You have interesting theories, but I think they are just guesses. You do not know that the priests plan what you claim. That doesn't bother me.*

"What is it, then?"

He hesitated, then erased with the sleeve of his robe. *You do not believe that the Returned are divine.*

"I thought we already talked about this."

We did. However, I realized now that this *is the reason why you treat me as you do. You are different because you do not believe in my godhood. Is that the only reason I find you interesting?*

And, if you do not believe, it makes me sad. Because a god is who I am, it is what I am, and if you do not believe in it, it makes me think you do not understand me.

He paused.

Yes. It does sound petulant. I am sorry.

She smiled, then tentatively touched his arm. He froze, looking down, but didn't pull back as he had times before. So she moved up beside him, resting against his arm.

"I don't have to believe in you to understand you," she said. "I'd say that those people who worship you are the ones who don't understand. They can't get close to you, see who you really are. They're too focused on the aura and the divinity."

He didn't respond.

"And," she said, "I'm not different *just* because I don't believe in you. There are a lot of people in the palace who don't believe. Bluefingers, some of the serving girls who wear brown, other scribes. They serve you just as reverently as the priests. I'm just . . . well, I'm an irreverent type. I didn't really listen to my father or the monks back home, either. Maybe that's what you need. Someone who would be willing to look beyond your godhood and just get to know you."

He nodded slowly. *That is comforting,* he wrote. *Though, it is very strange to be a god whose wife does not believe in him.*

Wife, she thought. Sometimes that was tough to remember. "Well," she said, "I should think it would do every man good to have a wife who isn't as in awe of him as everyone else is. Somebody has to keep you humble."

Humility is, I believe, somewhat opposite to godhood.

"Like sweetness?" she asked.

He chuckled. *Yes, just like that.* He put the board down. Then, hesitantly—a little frightened—he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer as

they looked out the window at the lights of a city that remained colorful, even at night.

BODIES. FOUR OF THEM. They all lay dead on the ground, blood an oddly dark color against the grass.

It was the day after Vivenna's visit to the D'Denir garden to meet with the forgers. She was back again. Sunlight streamed down, hot upon her head and neck as she stood with the rest of the gawking crowd. The silent D'Denir waited in rows behind her, soldiers of stone who would never march. Only they had seen the four men die.

People chattered with hushed voices, waiting for the city guard to finish their inspection. Denth had brought Vivenna quickly, before the bodies could be cleared. He had done so at her request. Now she wished she'd never asked.

To her enhanced eyes, the colors of the blood on grass were powerfully distinct. Red and green. It made almost a violet in combination. She stared at the corpses, feeling an odd sense of disconnection. Color. So strange to see the colors of skin paled. She could tell the difference—the intrinsic difference—between skin that was alive and skin that was dead.

Dead skin was ten shades whiter than live skin. It was caused by blood seeping down and out of the veins. Almost like . . . like the blood *was* the color, drained out of its casks. The paint of a human life which had been carelessly spilled, leaving the canvas blank.

She looked away.

"You see it?" Denth said, at her side.

She nodded silently.

"You asked about him. Well, here's what he does. *This* is why we're so worried. Look at those wounds."

She turned back. In the growing morning light, she could see something she'd missed before. The skin directly around the sword wounds had been completely drained of color. The wounds themselves had a dark black tinge to them. As if they had been infected with some terrible disease.

She turned back to Denth.

"Let's go," Denth said, leading her away from the crowd as the city Guards finally began to order people back, annoyed by the number of gawkers.

"Who were they?" she asked quietly.

Denth stared straight ahead. "A gang of thieves. Ones we'd worked with."

"You think he might come for us?"

"I'm not sure," Denth said. "He could probably find us if he wanted. I don't know."

Tonk Fah approached across the green as they passed through the D'Denir statues. "Jewels and Clod are on alert," Tonk Fah said. "None of us see him anywhere."

"What happened to the skin of those men?" Vivenna asked.

"It's that sword of his," Denth growled. "We *have* to find a way to deal with it, Tonks. We're going to end up crossing him, eventually. I can feel it."

"But what is the sword?" Vivenna asked. "And how did it drain the color from their skin?"

"We'll have to steal the thing, Denth," Tonk Fah said, rubbing his chin as Jewels and Clod filled in around them, making a protective pattern as they moved out into the human river of the street.

"Steal the sword?" Denth asked. "I'm not touching the thing! No, we have to make him use it. Draw it. He won't be able to keep it out for long. After that, we'll be able to take him easily. I'll kill him myself."

"He beat Arsteel," Jewels said quietly.

Denth froze. "He did *not* beat Arsteel! Not in a duel, at least."

"Vasher didn't use the sword," Jewels said. "There was no blackness to Arsteel's wounds."

"Then Vasher used a trick!" Denth said. "Ambush. Accomplices. Something. Vasher is no duelist."

Vivenna let herself get pulled along, thinking of those bodies. Denth and the others had spoken of the deaths this Vasher was causing. She'd wanted to see them. Well, now she had. And it left her feeling disturbed. Unsettled. And . . .

She frowned, itching slightly.

Someone with a lot of Breath was watching her.

Hey! Nightblood said. *It's VaraTreledees! We should go talk to him. He'll be happy to see me.*

Vasher stood openly atop the building. He didn't really care who saw him. He rarely did. An endless flow of people passed on the colorful street. VaraTreledees—Denth, as he called himself now—walked among them with his team. The woman, Jewels. Tonk Fah, as always. The clueless princess. And the abomination.

Is Shashara here? Nightblood asked, excitement in his nebulous voice. *We need to go see her! She'll be worried about what happened to me.*

"We killed Shashara long ago, Nightblood," Vasher said. "Just like we killed Arsteel." *Just like we'll eventually kill Denth.*

As usual, Nightblood refused to acknowledge Shashara's death. *She made me, you know,* Nightblood said. *Made me to destroy things that were evil. I'm rather good at it. I think she'd be proud of me. We should go talk to her. Show her how well I do my job.*

"You are good at it," Vasher whispered. "Too good."

Nightblood began to hum quietly, pleased at the perceived praise. Vasher, however, focused on the princess, walking in her obviously exotic dress, standing out like a flake of snow in the tropical heat. He would need to do something about her. Because of her, so many things were falling apart. Plans toppling like badly stacked boxes, creating a racket with their collapse. He didn't know where Denth had found her or how he kept control of her. However, Vasher was sorely tempted to jump down and let Nightblood take her.

The deaths the night before had already drawn too much attention. Nightblood was right. Vasher wasn't good at sneaking about. Rumors regarding him were widespread in the city. That was both good and bad.

Later, he thought, turning from the silly girl and her mercenary entourage. *Later.*

30

Lightsong!" Blushweaver said, hands on hips. "What in the name of the Iridescent Tones are you doing?"

Lightsong ignored her, instead applying his hands to the clump of muddy clay in front of him. His servants and priests stood in a large ring, looking nearly as confused as Blushweaver—who had arrived at his pavilion just a few moments before.

The pottery wheel spun. He held the clay, trying to get it to stay in place. Sunlight shone in through the sides of the pavilion, and the neatly manicured grass under his table was flecked with clay. As the wheel sped up, the clay twirled round, flipping out clods and clumps. Lightsong's hands became soaked with grimy, slick clay, and it didn't take long for the entire mess to flip off the wheel and squish to the ground.

"Hum," he said, regarding it.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Blushweaver asked. She wore one of her customary dresses—which meant nothing on the sides, very little at the top, and only slightly more through the front and back. She had her hair up in an intricately twisting woven pattern of braids and ribbon. Likely the work of a master stylist, who had been invited into the court to perform for one of the gods.

Lightsong hopped to his feet, holding his hands out to either side as servants rushed to wash them off. Others came and wiped the bits of clay from his fine robes. He stood thoughtfully as other servants removed the pottery wheel.

"Well?" Blushweaver asked. "What *was* that?"

"I just discovered that I am no good at pottery," Lightsong said. "Actually, I am worse than 'no good.' I am pathetic. Ridiculously bad. Can't even get the blasted clay to stay on the wheel."

"Well what did you expect?"

"I'm not sure," Lightsong said, walking across the pavilion toward a long table. Blushweaver—obviously annoyed at being led along—followed. Lightsong suddenly grabbed five lemons off of the table and threw them into the air. He proceeded to juggle them.

Blushweaver watched. And, for just a moment, she looked honestly concerned. "Lightsong?" she asked. "Dear. Is . . . everything all right?"

"I have never practiced juggling," he said, watching the lemons. "Now, please grab that guava fruit."

She hesitated, then carefully picked up the guava.

"Throw it," Lightsong said.

She tossed it at him. He deftly plucked it from the air, then threw it into the pattern with the lemons. "I didn't know I could do this," he said. "Not before today. What do you make of it?"

"I . . ." she cocked her head.

He laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen you at a loss for words, my dear."

"I don't know that I've ever seen another god throwing fruit into the air."

"It's more than this," Lightsong said, dipping down as he nearly lost one of the lemons. "Today I have discovered that I know a surprising number of sailing terms, that I am fantastic at mathematics, and that I have a fairly good eye for sketching. On the other hand, I know nothing about the dyeing industry, horses, or gardening. I have no talent for sculpting, I can't speak any foreign languages, and—as you've seen—I'm terrible at pottery."

Blushweaver watched him for a second.

He looked at her, letting the lemons drop but snatching the guava out of the air. He tossed it to a servant, who began peeling it for him. "My previous life, Blushweaver. These are skills that I—Lightsong—have no right to know. Whomever I was before I died, *he* could juggle. He knew about sailing. And he could sketch."

"We're not supposed to worry about the people we were before," Blushweaver said.

"I'm a god," Lightsong said, taking back a plate containing the peeled

and sliced guava, then offering a piece to Blushweaver. "And, by Kalad's Phantoms, I'll worry about whatever I please."

She paused, then smiled and took a slice. "Just when I thought I had you figured out . . ."

"You didn't have me figured out," he said lightly. "And neither did I. That's the point. Shall we go?"

She nodded, joining him as they began to cross the lawn, their servants bringing parasols to shade them. "You can't tell me that you've never wondered," Lightsong said.

"My dear," she replied, sucking on a guava piece, "I was *boring* before."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was an ordinary person! I would have been . . . Well, have you *seen* regular women?"

"Their proportions aren't quite up to your standards, I know," he said. "But many are quite attractive."

Blushweaver shivered. "Please. Why would you want to know about your normal life? What if you were a murderer or a rapist? Worse, what if you had bad fashion sense?"

He snorted at the twinkle in her eye. "You act so shallow. But I see the curiosity. You should try some of these things, let them tell you a little of who you were. There must have been something special about you for you to have Returned."

"Hum," she said, smiling and siding up to him. He stopped as she ran her finger down the front of his chest. "Well, if you're trying new things today, maybe there's something else you ought to think about. . . ."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not," she said. "But, how will you know who you were if you don't try? It would be an . . . experiment."

Lightsong laughed, pushing her hand away. "My dear, I fear you would find me less than satisfactory."

"I think you overestimate me."

"That's impossible."

She paused, flushing slightly.

"Uh . . ." Lightsong said. "Hum. I didn't exactly mean . . ."

"Oh, bother," she said. "Now you've spoiled the moment. I was about to say something very clever, I just know it."

He smiled. "Both of us, at a loss for words in one afternoon. I do believe we're losing our touch."

"*My* touch is perfectly fine, which you'd discover if you'd just let me show you."

He rolled his eyes and continued to walk. "You're hopeless."

"When all else fails, use sexual innuendo," she said lightly, joining him. "It always brings the focus back to where it belongs. On me."

"Hopeless," he said again. "But, I doubt we have time for me to chastise you again. We've arrived."

Indeed, Hopefinder's palace was before them. Lavender and silver, it had a pavilion out front prepared with three tables and food. Naturally, Blushweaver and Lightsong had arranged for the meeting ahead of time.

Hopefinder the Just, god of innocence and beauty, stood up as they approached. He appeared to be about thirteen years old. By apparent physical age, he was the youngest of the gods in the court. But they weren't supposed to acknowledge such discrepancies. After all, he'd Returned when his body had been two, which made him—in god years—Lightsong's senior by six years. In a place where most gods didn't last twenty years, and the average age was probably closer to ten, six years difference was very significant.

"Lightsong, Blushweaver," Hopefinder said, stiff and formal. "Welcome."

"Thank you, dear," Blushweaver said, smiling at him.

Hopefinder nodded, then gestured toward the tables. The three small tables were separate, but set close enough together for the meal to remain intimate while giving each god his or her own space.

"How have you been, Hopefinder?" Lightsong asked, sitting.

"Very well," Hopefinder said. His voice always seemed a little too mature for his body. Like a boy trying to imitate his father. "There was a particularly difficult case during petitions this morning. A mother with a child who was dying of the fevers. She'd already lost her other three, as well as her husband. All in the space of a year. Tragic."

"My dear," Blushweaver said with concern. "You're not actually considering . . . passing your Breath, are you?"

Hopefinder sat. "I don't know, Blushweaver. I am old. I feel old. Perhaps it is time for me to go. I'm fifth most aged, you know."

"Yes, but with the times growing so exciting!"

"Exciting?" he asked. "Why, they're calming down. The new queen is here, and my sources in the palace say that she's pursuing her duties to produce an heir with great vigor. Stability will soon arrive."

"Stability?" Blushweaver asked as the servants bought them each a chilled soup. "Hopefinder, I find it hard to believe that you're *so* uninformed."

"You think the Idrians plan to use the new queen in a play for the throne," Hopefinder said. "I know what you've been doing, Blushweaver. I disagree."

"And the rumors out in the city?" Blushweaver said. "The Idrian agents who are causing such a ruckus? This so-called second princess somewhere in the city?"

Lightsong paused, spoon halfway to his lips. *What was that?*

"The city's Idrians are *always* creating one crisis or another," Hopefinder said, waving his fingers dismissively. "What was that disturbance six months ago, the rebel on the outer dye plantations? He died in prison, I recall. Foreign workers rarely provide a stable societal underclass, but I don't fear them."

"They've never claimed to have a royal agent working with them," Blushweaver said. "Things could get out of hand *very* quickly."

"My interests in the city are quite secure," Hopefinder said, lacing his fingers in front of him. The servants took away his soup. He'd taken only three sips. "How about yours?"

"That's what this meeting is for," Blushweaver said.

"Excuse me," Lightsong said, raising a finger. "But what in the *Colors* are we talking about?"

"Unrest in the city, Lightsong," Hopefinder said. "Some of the locals are unsettled by the prospect of war."

"They could turn dangerous very easily," Blushweaver said, stirring her soup with a lazy motion. "I think that we should be prepared."

"I am," Hopefinder said, watching Blushweaver with his too-young face. Like all younger Returned—the God King included—Hopefinder would continue to age until his body reached maturity. Then, he would stop aging—just over the brink into the prime adulthood—until he gave up his Breath.

He acted so much like an adult. Lightsong hadn't interacted much with

children, but some of his attendants—when training—were youths. Hopefinder was not like those. All accounts said that Hopefinder, like other young Returned, had matured very quickly during his first year of life, coming to think and speak as an adult while his body was still that of a young child.

Hopefinder and Blushweaver continued to talk about the stability of the city, mentioning various acts of vandalism that had occurred. War plans stolen, city supply stations poisoned. Lightsong let them talk. *He doesn't seem to find Blushweaver's beauty distracting,* he thought as he watched. She turned to the fruit course, acting characteristically lascivious as she sucked on pieces of pineapple. Hopefinder either didn't care, or didn't notice, as she leaned forward, showing an impressive amount of cleavage.

Something is *different about him,* Lightsong thought. *He Returned when he was a child and acted like one for a very short time. Now, he's an adult in some ways, but a child in others.*

The transformation had made Hopefinder more mature. He was also taller and more physically impressive than ordinary boys his age, even if he didn't have the chiseled, majestic features of a fully grown god.

And yet, Lightsong thought, eating a piece of pineapple, *different Gods have different body styles. Blushweaver is inhumanly well endowed, particularly for how thin she is. Yet Mercystar is plump and curvaceous all around. Others, like Allmother, look physically old.*

Lightsong knew he didn't deserve his powerful physique. Like the knowledge of how to juggle, he somehow understood that a person usually had to work hard at manual labor to have such a muscular body. Lounging about, eating and drinking, should have made him plump and flabby.

But there have been gods who were fat, he thought, remembering some of the pictures he had seen of Returned who had come before him. *There was a time in our culture's history when that was seen as the ideal. . . .* Did Returned looks have something to do with the way society saw them? Perhaps their opinion of ideal beauty? That would certainly explain Blushweaver.

Some things survived the transformation. Language. Skills. And, as he thought about it, social competence. Considering the fact that the gods spent their lives locked up atop a plateau, they probably should have been far less well adjusted than they were. At the very least, they should have been ignorant

and naive. Yet most of them were consummate schemers, sophisticates with a surprisingly good grasp of what happened in the outside world.

Memory itself didn't survive. Why? Why could Lightsong juggle and understand the meaning of the word "bowsprit," yet at the same time be unable to remember who his parents had been? And who was that face he saw in his dreams? Why had storms and tempests dominated his dreams lately? What was the red panther that had appeared, yet again, in his nightmares the night before?

"Blushweaver," Hopefinder said, holding up a hand. "Enough. Before we go any further, I must point out that your obvious attempts to seduce me will gain you nothing."

Blushweaver glanced away, looking embarrassed.

Lightsong shook himself out of his contemplations. "My dear Hopefinder," he said. "She was *not* trying to seduce you. You must understand; Blushweaver's aura of allure is simply a part of who she is; it's part of what makes her so charming."

"Regardless," he said. "I will not be swayed by it or by her paranoid arguments and fears."

"My contacts do not think that these things are simple 'paranoia,'" Blushweaver said as the fruit dishes were removed. A small chilled fish fillet arrived next.

"Contacts?" Hopefinder asked. "And just who are these 'contacts' you keep mentioning?"

"People within the God King's palace itself."

"We all have people in the God King's palace," Hopefinder said.

"I don't," Lightsong said. "Can I have one of yours?"

Blushweaver rolled her eyes. "My contact is *quite* important. He hears things, knows things. War *is* coming."

"I don't believe you," he said, picking at his food, "but that doesn't really matter now, does it? You're not here to get me to believe you. You just want my army."

"Your codes," Blushweaver said. "Lifeless security phrases. What will it cost us to get them?"

Hopefinder picked at his fish some more. "Do you know, Blushweaver, why I find my existence so boring?"

She shook her head. "Honestly, I *still* think you're bluffing on that count."

"I'm not," he said. "Eleven years. Eleven years of peace. Eleven years to grow to sincerely loathe this system of government we have. We all attend the assembly court of judgment. We listen to the arguments. But most of us don't matter. In any given vote, only those with sway in that field have any real say over anything. During war times, those of us with Lifeless Commands are important. The rest of the time, our opinion rarely matters.

"You want my Lifeless? Be welcome to them! I have had no opportunity to use them in eleven years, and I venture that another eleven will pass without incident. I will give you those Commands, Blushweaver—but only in exchange for *your* vote. You sit on the council of social ills. You have an important vote practically every week. In exchange for my security phrases, you must promise to vote in social matters as I say, from now until one of us dies."

The pavilion fell silent.

"Ah, so now you reconsider," Hopefinder said, smiling. "I've heard you complain about your duties in court—that you find your votes trivial. Well, it's not so easy to let go of them, is it? Your vote is all the influence you have. It isn't flashy, but it is potent. It—"

"Done," Blushweaver said sharply.

Hopefinder cut off.

"My vote is yours," Blushweaver said, meeting his eyes. "The terms are acceptable. I swear it in front of your priests and mine, before another god even."

By the Colors, Lightsong thought. *She really* is *serious.* Part of him had presumed, all along, that her posturing about the war was just another game. Yet the woman who stared Hopefinder in the eyes was not playing. She sincerely believed that Hallandren was in danger, and she wanted to make certain that the armies were unified and prepared. She cared.

And that left him worried. What had he gotten himself into? What if there really was a war? As he watched the interaction of the two gods, he was left chilled by how easily and quickly they dealt with the fate of the Hallandren people. To Hopefinder, his control of a quarter of the Hallandren armies should have been a sacred obligation. He was ready to toss that aside simply because he had grown bored.

Who am I to chastise another's lack of piety? Lightsong thought. *I, who don't even believe in my own divinity.*

And yet . . . at that moment, as Hopefinder prepared to release his Commands to Blushweaver, Lightsong thought he saw something. Like a remembered fragment of a memory. A dream that he might never have dreamed.

A shining room, glowing, reflecting light. A room of steel.

A prison.

"Servants and priests, withdraw," Hopefinder commanded.

They retreated, leaving the three gods alone beside their half-eaten meals, pavilion silk flapping slightly in the wind.

"The security phrase," Hopefinder said, looking at Blushweaver, "is 'A candle by which to see.' "

It was the title of a famous poem; even Lightsong knew it. Blushweaver smiled. Speaking those words to any of Hopefinder's ten thousand Lifeless in the barracks would allow her to override their current orders and take complete control of them. Lightsong suspected that by the end of the day, she'd make the trip down to the barracks—which lay at the base of the court, and were considered part of it—and begin imprinting Hopefinder's soldiers with a new security phrase, known only to her and perhaps a few of her most trusted priests.

"And now, I withdraw," Hopefinder said, standing. "There is a vote this evening at the court. You will attend, Blushweaver, and you will cast your vote in favor of the reformist arguments."

With that, he left.

"Why do I feel like we've just been manipulated?" Lightsong asked.

"We only got manipulated, my dear, if there *isn't* war. If there is, then we may have just set ourselves up to save the entire court—perhaps the kingdom itself."

"How very altruistic of us," Lightsong said.

"We're like that," Blushweaver said as the servants returned. "So selfless at times it's painful. Either way, that means we control two gods' worth of Lifeless."

"Mine and Hopefinder's?"

"Actually," she said, "I was speaking of Hopefinder's and Mercystar's. She confided hers to me yesterday, all the while talking about how comforting she

found it that you'd taken a personal interest in the incident at her palace. That was very well done, by the way."

She seemed to be fishing for something. Lightsong smiled. "No, I didn't know that would encourage her to release her Commands to you. I was just curious."

"Curious about a murdered servant?"

"Actually, yes," Lightsong said. "The death of a servant of the Returned is quite disconcerting to me, particularly in its proximity to our own palaces."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow.

"Would I lie to you?" Lightsong asked.

"Only every time you claim you don't want to sleep with me. Lies, brazen lies."

"Innuendo again, my dear?"

"Of course not," she said. "That was quite blatant. Regardless, I know that you are lying about that investigation. What was the *real* purpose of it?"

Lightsong paused, then sighed, shaking his head, waving for a servant to bring back the fruit—he liked that better. "I don't know, Blushweaver. In all honesty, I'm beginning to wonder if I might have been a kind of officer of the law in my previous life."

She frowned.

"You know, like city watch. I was *extremely* good at interrogating those servants. At least, that's my own humble opinion."

"Which we've already established is quite altruistic."

"Quite," he agreed. "I think this might explain how I ended up dying in a 'bold' way, giving me my name."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. "I just always assumed you were found in bed with a much younger woman and her father killed you. Seems far more bold than dying from stab wounds while trying to catch some petty thief."

"Your mockery slides right off of my altruistic humility."

"Ah, indeed."

"Either way," Lightsong said, eating another chunk of pineapple. "I was a sheriff or investigator of some kind. I'll bet that if I ever got my hands on a sword, I'd prove one of the best duelists this city has ever seen."

She regarded him for a moment. "You're serious."

"Dead serious. Dead as a squirrel serious."

She paused, looking puzzled.

"Personal joke," he said, sighing. "But yes, I believe it. Though, there's one thing I can't figure out."

"And that is?"

"How juggling lemons fits into it all."

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I feel I have to ask one more time," Denth said. "Do we *have* to go through with this?" Denth walked with Vivenna, Tonk Fah, Jewels, and Clod. Parlin had stayed behind at Denth's suggestion. He was worried about the dangers of the meeting, and didn't want another body to keep track of.

"Yes, we have to go through this," Vivenna said. "They're my people, Denth."

"So?" he asked. "Princess, mercenaries are *my* people, and you don't see me spending that much time with them. They're a smelly, annoying lot."

"Not to mention rude," Tonk Fah added.

Vivenna rolled her eyes. "Denth, I'm their *princess.* Besides, you yourself said that they were influential."

"Their leaders are," Denth said. "And they'd be perfectly happy to meet with you on neutral ground. Going into the slums isn't necessary—the common people, they really aren't all that important."

She eyed him. "That is the difference between Hallandren and Idrians. We pay attention to our people."

Behind, Jewels snorted in derision.

"I'm not Hallandren," Denth noted. However, he let the statement drop as they approached the slums. Vivenna had to admit that as they grew closer, she did feel a little more apprehensive.

This slum felt different from the others. Darker, somehow. Something more than just the run-down shops and unrepaired streets. Small groups of

men stood on street corners, watching her with suspicious eyes. Every once in a while, Vivenna would catch a glimpse of a building with women in very revealing clothing—even for Hallandren—hanging about the front. Some even whistled toward Denth and Tonk Fah.

This was a foreign place. Everywhere else in T'Telir, she felt like she didn't fit in. Here, she felt unwelcome. Distrusted. Even hated.

She steeled herself. Somewhere in this place was a group of tired, overworked, frightened Idrians. The threatening atmosphere made her feel even sorrier for her people. She didn't know if they would be much help in trying to sabotage the Hallandren war effort, but she did know one thing: She intended to help them. If her people had slipped through the monarchy's fingers, then it was her duty to try and pick them back up.

"That look on your face," Denth said. "What's it for?"

"I'm worried about my people," she said, shivering as they passed a large group of street toughs dressed in black with red armbands, their faces stained and dirtied. "I came by this slum when Parlin and I were searching for a new home. I didn't want to get close, even though I'd heard that rents were cheap. I can't believe that my people are so oppressed that they would have to live somewhere in here, surrounded by all of *this.*"

Denth frowned. "Surrounded by it?"

Vivenna nodded. "Living among prostitutes and gangs, having to walk past such things every day . . ."

Denth started laughing, startling her. "Princess," he said, "your people don't live *among* prostitutes and gangs. Your people *are* the prostitutes and gangs."

Vivenna stopped in the middle of the street. "What?"

Denth glanced back at her. "This is the Idrian quarter of the city. These slums are called the Highlands, for Color's sake."

"Impossible," she snapped.

"Very possible," Denth replied. "I've seen it in cities across the world. Immigrants gather, make a little enclave. That enclave gets conveniently ignored by the rest of the city. When roads are repaired, other places come first. When guards are sent to patrol, they avoid the foreign sections."

"The slum becomes its own little world," Tonk Fah said, walking up beside her.

"Everyone you pass in here is an Idrian," Denth said, waving for her to

keep walking. "There's a reason your kind have a bad reputation in the rest of the city."

Vivenna felt a numb chillness. *No,* she thought. *No, it's not possible.*

Unfortunately, she soon began to see signs. Symbols of Austre placed—unobtrusive by intention—in the corners of windowsills or on doorsteps. People in grays and whites. Mementos of the highlands in the form of shepherd's caps or wool cloaks. And yet, if these people were of Idris, then they'd been completely corrupted. Colors marred their costumes, not to mention the air of danger and hostility they exuded. And how could any Idrian even *think* of becoming a prostitute?

"I don't understand, Denth. We are a peaceful people. A people of mountain villages. We are open. Friendly."

"That kind doesn't last long in a slum," he said, walking beside her. "They change or they get beaten down."

Vivenna shivered, feeling a stab of anger at Hallandren. *I could have forgiven the Hallandren for making my people poor. But this? They've made thugs and thieves out of caring shepherds and farmers. They've turned our women into prostitutes and our children to urchins.*

She knew she shouldn't let herself get angry. And yet, she had to grit her teeth and work very, *very* hard to keep her hair from bleeding to a smoldering red. The images awoke something within her. Something she had consistently avoided thinking about.

Hallandren has ruined these people. Just as it ruined me by dominating my childhood, by forcing me to honor the obligation to be taken and raped in the name of protecting my country.

I hate this city.

They were unseemly thoughts. She couldn't afford to hate Hallandren. She had been told that on many occasions. She had trouble lately remembering why.

But she succeeded in keeping her hatred, and hair, under control. A few moments later, Thame joined them and led them the rest of the distance. She had been told they would be meeting in a large park, but Vivenna soon saw that the term "park" had been used loosely. The plot of land was barren, strewn with garbage, and hemmed in by buildings on all sides.

Her group stopped at the edge of this dreary garden and waited as Thame went ahead. People had gathered as Thame had promised. Most were of the

same type she had seen earlier. Men wearing dark, ominous colors and cynical expressions. Cocky street toughs. Women in the garb of prostitutes. Some worn-down older people.

Vivenna forced on a smile, but it felt insincere, even to her. For their benefit, she changed her hair color to yellow. The color of happiness and excitement. The people muttered among themselves.

Thame soon returned and waved her forward.

"Wait," Vivenna said. "I wanted to talk to the common people before we meet with the leaders."

Thame shrugged. "If you wish . . ."

Vivenna stepped forward. "People of Idris," she said. "I've come to offer you comfort and hope."

The people continued to talk among themselves. Very few seemed to pay any attention to her at all. Vivenna swallowed. "I know that you've had hard lives. But I want to promise you that the king *does* care for you and want to support you. I will find a way to bring you home."

"Home?" one of the men said. "Back to the highlands?"

Vivenna nodded.

Several people snorted at that comment, and a few trailed away. Vivenna watched them go with concern. "Wait," she said. "Don't you want to hear me? I bring news from your king."

The people ignored her.

"Most of them just wanted confirmation that you were whom you were rumored to be, Your Highness," Thame said quietly.

Vivenna turned back toward the groups still talking quietly in the garden. "Your lives can get better," she promised. "I will see you cared for."

"Our lives are already better," one of the men said. "There is nothing for us in the highlands. I earn twice as much here as I did back there." Others nodded in agreement.

"Then why even come to see me?" she whispered.

"I told you, Princess," Thame said. "They're patriots—they cling to being Idrian. City Idrians. We stick together, we do. You being here, it means something to them, don't worry. They may seem indifferent, but they'll do *anything* to get back at the Hallandren."

Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought, growing even more deeply upset. *These people aren't even Idrians anymore.* Thame called them "patriots," but

all she saw was a group held together by the eternal pressures of Hallandren disdain.

She turned, giving up on her speech. These people were not interested in hope or comfort. They only wanted revenge. She could use that, perhaps, but it made her feel dirty even to consider it. Thame led her and the others down a pathway beaten into the ugly field of weeds and trash. Near the far side of the "park," they found a wide structure that was partially a storage shed, partially an open wooden pavilion. She could see the leaders waiting inside.

There were three of them, each with his own complement of bodyguards. She had been told of them ahead of time. The leaders wore rich, vibrant T'Telir colors. Slumlords. Vivenna felt her stomach twist. All three of the men had at least the First Heightening. One of them had attained the Third.

Jewels and Clod took their places outside the building, guarding Vivenna's escape route. Vivenna walked in and sat in the last open chair. Denth and Tonk Fah took up protective places behind her.

Vivenna regarded the slumlords. All three were variations on the same theme. The one on the left looked most comfortable in his rich clothing. That would be Paxen—the "gentleman Idrian," he was called. He'd gotten his money from running brothels. The one on the right looked like he needed a haircut to match his fine garments. That would be Ashu, who was known for running and funding underground fighting leagues where men could watch Idrians box each other to unconsciousness. The one in the center seemed the self-indulgent type. He was sloppy—but in a purposefully relaxed way, perhaps because it was a nice accent to his handsome, youthful face. Rira, Thame's employer.

She reminded herself not to put too much stock in any facile interpretation of their appearances. These were dangerous men.

The room was silent.

"I'm not sure what to say to you," Vivenna said finally. "I came to find something that doesn't exist. I was hoping that the people still cared about their heritage."

Rira leaned forward, sloppy clothing out of place compared with the clothing of the others in the room. "You're our princess," he said. "Daughter of our king. We care about that."

"Kind of," said Paxen.

"Really, Princess," Rira said. "We're honored to meet with you. And curious at your intentions in our city. You've been making quite a stir."

Vivenna regarded them with a serious expression. Finally, she sighed. "You all know that war is coming."

Rira nodded. Ashu, however, shook his head. "I'm not convinced there will be war. Not yet."

"It *is* coming," Vivenna said sharply. "I promise you that. My intentions in this city, therefore, are to make certain that the war goes as well for Idris as possible."

"And what would that entail?" Ashu asked. "A royal on the throne of Hallandren?"

Was that what she wanted? "I just want our people to survive."

"A weak middle ground," said Paxen, polishing the top of his fine cane. "Wars are fought to be won, Your Highness. The Hallandren have Lifeless. Beat them, and they'll just make more. I think that an Idrian military presence in the city would be an absolute *necessity* if you wanted to bring our homeland freedom."

Vivenna frowned.

"You think to overthrow the city?" asked Ashu. "If you do, what do we get out of it?"

"Wait," said Paxen. "Overthrow the city? Are we sure we want to get involved in *that* sort of thing again? What of Vahr's failure? We all lost a lot of money in that venture."

"Vahr was from Pahn Kahl," said Ashu. "Not one of us at all. I'm willing to take another risk if there are real royals involved this time."

"I didn't say anything about overthrowing the kingdom," Vivenna said. "I just want to bring the people some hope." *Or, at least, I did . . .*

"Hope?" asked Paxen. "Who cares about hope? I want commitments. Will titles be handed out? Who gets the trade contracts if Idris wins?"

"You have a sister," Rira said. "A third one, unmarried. Is her hand bargainable? Royal blood could gain *my* support for your war."

Vivenna's stomach twisted. "Gentlemen," she said in her diplomat's voice, "this is not about seeking personal gain. This is about patriotism."

"Of course, of course," Rira said. "But even patriots should earn rewards. Right?"

All three looked at her expectantly.

Vivenna stood up. "I will be going, now."

Denth, looking surprised, laid a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure?" he asked. "It took quite a bit of effort to set up this meeting."

"I have been willing to work with thugs and thieves, Denth," she said quietly. "But seeing these and knowing they're my own people is too hard."

"You judge us quickly, Princess," Rira said from behind, chuckling. "Don't tell me that you didn't expect this?"

"Expecting something is different from seeing it firsthand, Rira. I expected you three. I didn't expect to see what had happened to our people."

"And the Five Visions?" Rira asked. "You sweep in here, judge us beneath you, then sweep away? That's not very Idrian of you."

She turned back toward the men. The long-haired Ashu had already stood and was gathering his bodyguards to go, grumbling about the "waste of time."

"What do you know of being Idrian?" she snapped. "Where is your obedience of Austre?"

Rira reached beneath his shirt, pulling out a small white disk, inscribed with his parents' names. An Austrin charm of obedience. "My father *carried* me down here from the highlands, Princess. He died working the Edgli fields. I've pulled myself up by the pain of my scraped, bleeding hands. I worked very hard to make things better for your people. When Vahr spoke of revolution, I gave him coin to feed his supporters."

"You buy Breath," she said. "And you make prostitutes of housewives."

"I live," he said. "And I make sure that everyone else has enough food. Will *you* do better for them?"

Vivenna frowned. "I . . ."

She fell silent as she heard the screams.

Her life sense jolted her, warning of large groups of people approaching. She spun as the slumlords cursed, standing. Outside, through the garden, she saw something terrible. Purple-and-yellow uniforms on hulking men with grey faces.

Lifeless soldiers. The city watch.

Peasants scattered, screaming as the Lifeless tromped into the garden, led by a number of uniformed living city guards. Denth cursed, shoving Vivenna to the side. "Run!" he said, whipping his sword free.

"But—"

Tonk Fah grabbed her arm, towing her out of the building as Denth charged the guards. The slumlords and their people were in disarray as they fled, though the city guards were quickly moving to cut off the exits.

Tonk Fah cursed, pulling Vivenna into a small alleyway across from the garden.

"What's going on?" she asked, heart thumping.

"Raid," Tonk Fah said. "Shouldn't be too dangerous, unless . . ."

Blades sounded, metal clashing against metal, and the screams grew more desperate. Vivenna glanced backward. The men from the slumlords' groups, feeling trapped, had engaged the Lifeless. Vivenna felt a sense of horror, watching the terrible, grey-faced men wade among the swords and daggers, ignoring wounds. The creatures pulled out their weapons and began to attack. Men yelled and screamed, falling, bloody.

Denth moved to defend the mouth of Vivenna's alleyway. She didn't know where Jewels had gone.

"Kalad's Phantoms!" Tonk Fah cursed, pushing her ahead of him as they retreated. "Those fools decided to resist. Now we're in trouble."

"But how did they find us!"

"Don't know," he said. "Don't care. They might be after you. They might just be after those slumlords. I hope we never find out. *Keep moving!*"

Vivenna obeyed, rushing down the dark alleyway, trying to keep from tripping on her long dress. It proved very impractical to run in, and Tonk Fah kept shooing her forward, looking back anxiously. She heard grunts and echoing yells as Denth fought something at the mouth of the alleyway.

Vivenna and Tonk Fah burst out of the alleyway. There, standing in the street waiting, was a group of five Lifeless. Vivenna lurched to a halt. Tonk Fah cursed.

The Lifeless looked as if they were stone, their expressions eerily grim in the waning light. Tonk Fah glanced backward, obviously decided that Denth wasn't going to be arriving anytime soon, then resignedly held his hands up and dropped his sword. "I can't take five on my own, Princess," he whispered. "Not Lifeless. We'll have to let them arrest us."

Vivenna slowly held her hands up as well.

The Lifeless pulled out their weapons.

"Uh . . ." Tonk Fah said. "We surrender?"

The creatures charged.

"Run!" he shouted, reaching down and snatching his sword off the ground.

Vivenna stumbled to the side as several of the lifeless charged Tonk Fah. She scrambled away as quickly as she could. Tonk Fah tried to follow, but had to stop to defend himself. She slowed, glancing back in time to see him ram his dueling blade through the neck of a Lifeless.

The creature gushed something that was not blood. Three others got around Tonk Fah, though he did manage to whip his blade to the side, taking one in the back of the leg. It fell to the cobbles.

Two ran toward her.

Vivenna watched them come, mind numb. Should she stay? Try to help . . .

Help how? something screamed within her. That something was visceral and primal. *Run!*

And she did. She dashed away, overwhelmed with terror, taking the first corner she saw, ducking into an alleyway. She raced for the other end, but in her haste she tripped on her skirt.

She hit the cobblestones roughly, crying out. She heard footsteps behind her, and she yelled for help, ignoring her bruised elbow as she quickly tore her skirt off, leaving only her under breeches. She scrambled to her feet, screaming again.

Something darkened the other end of the alleyway. A hulking figure with grey skin. Vivenna stopped, then spun. The other two entered the alleyway behind her. She backed against the wall, feeling suddenly cold. Shocked.

Austre, God of Colors, she thought, trembling. *Please . . .*

The three Lifeless advanced on her, weapons drawn. She looked down. A bit of rope, frayed but still useful, sat in the refuse beside her discarded green skirt.

Like everything else, the rope called to her. As if it *knew* that it could live again. She couldn't sense the Lifeless bearing down on her, but ironically she felt as if she could sense the rope. Could imagine it, twisting around legs, tying the creatures up.

Those Breaths you hold, Denth had said. *They're a tool. Almost priceless. Certainly powerful . . .*

She glanced back at the Lifeless, with their inhumanly human eyes. She

felt her heart thumping so hard it felt like someone was pounding on her chest. She watched them approach.

And saw her death reflected in their unfeeling eyes.

Tears on her face, she fell to her knees, trembling as she grabbed the rope. She knew the mechanics. Her tutors had trained her. She'd need to touch the fallen skirt to drain color out of it.

"Come to life," she begged the rope.

Nothing happened.

She knew the mechanics, but that obviously wasn't enough. She wept, eyes blurry. "Please," she begged. "Please. Save me."

The first Lifeless reached her—the one who had cut her off at the far end of the alleyway. She cringed, cowering to the dirty street.

The creature leaped over her.

She looked up in shock as the creature slammed its weapon into one of the others as they arrived. Vivenna blinked her eyes clear, and only then did she recognize the newcomer.

Not Denth. Not Tonk Fah. A creature with skin as grey as that of the men attacking her, which was why she hadn't recognized him at first.

Clod.

He expertly took off the head of his first opponent, wielding his thick-bladed sword. Something clear sprayed from the neck of the beheaded creature as it fell backward, tumbling to the ground. Dead—apparently—as any man would have been.

Clod blocked an attack from the remaining Lifeless guard. Behind, in the mouth of the alleyway, two more appeared. They charged as Clod backed up, firmly planting one foot on either side of Vivenna, his sword held before him. It dripped clear liquid.

The remaining lifeless guard waited for the other two to approach. Vivenna trembled, too tired—too numb—to flee. She glanced upward, and saw something almost human in Clod's eyes as he raised his sword against the three. It was the first emotion she'd seen in any Lifeless, though she might have imagined it.

Determination.

The three attacked. She had assumed—in her ignorance back in Idris—that Lifeless were like decaying skeletons or corpses. She'd imagined them attacking in waves, lacking skill, but having relentless, dark power.

She'd been wrong. These creatures moved with proficiency and coordination, just as a human might. Except there was no speaking. No yelling or grunting. Just silence as Clod fended off one attack, then rammed his elbow into the face of a second Lifeless. He moved with a fluidity she had rarely seen, his skill matching the brief moment of dazzling speed that Denth had displayed in the restaurant.

Clod whipped his sword around and took the third Lifeless in the leg. One of the others, however, rammed his blade through Clod's stomach. Something clear squirted out both sides, spraying Vivenna. Clod didn't even grunt as he brought his weapon around and took off a second head.

The Lifeless guard died, falling to the ground and leaving his weapon sticking from Clod's stomach. One of the other guards stumbled away, leg bleeding clear blood, and then it fell backward to the ground too. Clod efficiently turned his attention to the last standing Lifeless, which did not retreat, but took an obviously defensive stance.

The stance didn't work; Clod took this last one down in a matter of seconds, slamming his sword repeatedly against that of his opponent before spinning it around in an unexpected motion and taking off his enemy's sword hand. That was followed by a blow to the stomach, dropping the creature. In a final motion, he efficiently rammed his blade through the neck of a fallen creature, stopping it from trying to crawl toward Vivenna, a knife in its hand.

The alleyway fell still. Clod turned toward her, eyes lacking emotion, square jaw and rectangular face set above a thick, muscled neck. He began to twitch. He shook his head, as if trying to clear his vision. An awful lot of clear liquid was pouring from his torso. He placed one hand against the wall, then slumped to his knees.

Vivenna hesitated, then reached out a hand toward him. Her hand fell on his arm. The skin was cold.

A shadow moved on the other side of the alleyway. She looked up, apprehensive, still in shock.

"Aw, Colors," Tonk Fah said, running forward, outfit wet with clear liquid. "Denth! She's here!" He knelt down beside Vivenna. "You okay?"

She nodded dully, only barely aware that she was still holding her skirt in one hand. That meant her legs—to just above her knees—were exposed. She couldn't find it in herself to care. Nor did she care that her hair was bleached

white. She just stared at Clod, who knelt before her, head bowed, as if worshiping at some strange altar. His weapon slipped from his twitching fingers and clanged to the cobbles. His eyes stared forward, glassy.

Tonk Fah followed her gaze, looking at Clod. "Yeah," he said. "Jewels is *not* going to be pleased. Come on, we need to get out of here."

32

He was always gone when Siri awoke.

She lay in the deep, well-stuffed bed, morning light streaming through the window. Already, the day was growing warm, and even her single sheet was too hot. She threw it off but remained on the bed, looking up at the ceiling.

She could tell from the sunlight that it was nearly noon. She and Susebron tended to stay up late talking. That was probably a good thing. Some might see that she was getting up later and later each morning, and think that it was due to other activities.

She stretched. At first, it had been strange to communicate with the God King. As the days progressed, however, it was feeling more and more natural to her. She found his writing—uncertain, unpracticed letters that explained such interesting thoughts—to be endearing. If he spoke, she suspected that his voice would be kindly. He was so tender. She'd never have expected that.

She smiled, sinking back into her pillow, idly wishing for him to still be there when she awoke. She was happy. That, also, was something she'd never expected from Hallandren. She did miss the highlands, and her inability to leave the Court of Gods frustrated her, particularly considering the politics.

And yet there were other things. Marvelous things. The brilliant colors, the performers, the sheer *overwhelming* experience of T'Telir. And there was the opportunity to speak with Susebron each night. Her brashness had been such a shame and an embarrassment to her family, but Susebron found it fascinating, even alluring.

She smiled again, letting herself dream. However, real life began to intrude. Susebron was in danger. Real, serious danger. He refused to believe that his priests could bear him any sort of malice or be a threat. That same innocence which made him so appealing was also a terrible liability.

But what to do? Nobody else knew of his predicament. There was only one person who could help him. That person, unfortunately, wasn't up to the task. She had ignored her lessons, and had come to her fate wholly unprepared.

So what? a part of her mind whispered.

Siri stared at the ceiling. She found it hard to summon her customary shame at having ignored her lessons. She'd made a mistake. How much time was she going to spend moping, annoyed at herself for something done and gone?

All right, she told herself. *Enough excuses. I might not have prepared as well as I should, but I'm here, now, and I need to do something.*

Because nobody else will.

She climbed out of bed, running her fingers through her long hair. Susebron liked it long—he found it as fascinating as her serving women did. With them to help her care for it, the length was worth the trouble. She folded her arms, wearing only her shift, pacing. She needed to play their game. She hated thinking of it that way. "Game" implied small stakes. This was no game. It was the God King's life.

She searched through her memory, dredging up what scraps she could from her lessons. Politics was about exchanges. It was about giving what you had—or what you implied that you had—in order to gain more. It was like being a merchant. You started with a certain stock, and by the end of the year, you hoped to have increased that stock. Or maybe even have changed it into a completely different and better stock.

Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike, Lightsong had told her. *Don't appear too innocent, but don't appear too smart either. Be average.*

She stopped beside the bed then gathered up the bedsheets and towed them over to the smoldering fire to burn, as was her daily chore.

Exchanges, she thought, watching the sheets catch fire in the large hearth. *What do I have to trade or exchange? Not much.*

It would have to do.

She walked over and pulled open the door. As usual, a group of serving

women waited outside. Siri's standard ladies moved around her, bringing clothing. Another group of servants, however, moved to tidy the room. Several of these wore brown.

As her servants dressed her, she watched one of the girls in brown. At a convenient moment, Siri stepped over, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"You're from Pahn Kahl," Siri said quietly.

The girl nodded, surprised.

"I have a message I want you to give to Bluefingers," Siri whispered. "Tell him I have vital information he needs to know. I'd like to trade. Tell him it could change his plans drastically."

The girl paled, but nodded, and Siri stepped back to continue dressing. Several of the other serving women had heard the exchange, but it was a sacred tenet of the Hallandren religion that the servants of a god weren't to repeat what they heard in confidence. Hopefully that would hold true. If it didn't, then she hadn't really given that much away.

Now she just had to decide just what "vital information" she had, and why exactly Bluefingers should care about it.

"MY DEAR QUEEN!" Lightsong said, actually going so far as to embrace Siri as she stepped into his box at the arena.

Siri smiled as Lightsong waved for her to seat herself in one of his chaise lounges. Siri sat with care—she was coming to favor the elaborate Hallandren gowns, but moving gracefully in them took quite a bit of skill. As she settled, Lightsong called for fruit.

"You treat me too kindly," Siri said.

"Nonsense," Lightsong said. "You're my queen! Besides, you remind me of someone of whom I was very fond."

"And who is that?"

"I honestly have no idea," Lightsong said, accepting a plate of sliced grapes, then handing them to Siri. "I can barely remember her. Grapes?"

Siri raised an eyebrow, but she knew by now not to encourage him *too* much. "Tell me," she asked, using a little wooden spear to eat her grape slices. "Why do they call you Lightsong the Bold?"

"There is an easy answer to that," he said, leaning back. "It is because of all the gods, only I am bold enough to act like a complete idiot."

Siri raised an eyebrow.

"My station requires true courage," he continued. "You see, I am *normally* quite a solemn and boring person. At nights my fondest desire is to sit and compose interminably periphrastic lectures on morality for my priests to read to my followers. Alas, I cannot. Instead, I go out each evening, abandoning didactic theology in favor of something which requires true courage: spending time with the other gods."

"Why does *that* take courage?"

He looked at her. "My lady. Have you *seen* how positively tedious they all can be?"

Siri laughed. "No, really," she said. "Where did the name come from?"

"It's a complete misnomer," Lightsong said. "Obviously you're intelligent enough to see that. Our names and titles are assigned randomly by a small monkey who has been fed an exceedingly large amount of gin."

"Now you're just being silly."

"Now?" Lightsong asked. "*Now?*" he raised a cup of wine toward her. "My dear, I am *always* silly. Please be good enough to retract that statement at once!"

Siri just shook her head. Lightsong, it appeared, was in rare form this afternoon. *Great,* she thought. *My husband is in danger of being murdered by unknown forces and my only allies are a scribe who's afraid of me and a god who makes no sense.*

"It has to do with death," Lightsong finally said as the priests began to file into the arena floor below for this day's round of arguments.

Siri looked toward him.

"All men die," Lightsong said. "Some, however, die in ways that exemplify a particular attribute or emotion. They show a spark of something greater than the rest of mankind. That is what is said to bring us back."

He fell silent.

"You died showing great bravery, then?" Siri asked.

"Apparently," he said. "I don't know for sure. Something in my dreams suggests that I may have insulted a very large panther. That sounds rather brave, don't you think?"

"You don't know how you died?"

He shook his head. "We forget," he said. "We awake without memories. I don't even know what work I did."

Siri smiled. "I suspect that you were a diplomat or a salesman of some sort. Something that required you to talk a lot, but say very little!"

"Yes," he said quietly, seeming unlike himself as he stared down at the priests below. "Yes, no doubt that was it exactly . . ." He shook his head, then smiled at her. "Regardless, my dear queen, I have provided a surprise for you this day!"

Do I want to be surprised by Lightsong? She glanced about nervously.

He laughed. "No need to fear," he said. "My surprises rarely cause bodily harm, and never to beautiful queens." He waved his hand, and an elderly man with an extraordinarily long white beard approached.

Siri frowned.

"This is Hoid," Lightsong said. "Master storyteller. I believe you had some questions you wished to ask . . ."

Siri laughed in relief, remembering only now her request to Lightsong. She glanced at the priests below. "Um, shouldn't we be paying attention to the speeches?"

Lightsong waved indifferently. "Pay attention? Ridiculous! That would be far too responsible of us. We're gods, for the Colors' sake. Or, well, I am. You're close enough. A god-in-law, one might say. Anyway, do *you* really want to listen to a bunch of stuffy priests talk about sewage treatment?"

Siri grimaced.

"I thought not. Besides, neither of us have votes pertaining to this issue. So let us spend our time wisely. We never know when we will run out!"

"Of time?" Siri asked. "But you're immortal!"

"Not run out of time," Lightsong said, holding up his plate. "Of grapes. I *hate* listening to storytellers without grapes."

Siri rolled her eyes, but continued to eat the grape slices. The storyteller waited patiently. As she looked more closely, she could tell that he wasn't quite as old as he seemed at first glance. The beard must be a badge of his profession, and while it didn't appear to be fake, she suspected that it had been bleached. He was much really younger than he wanted to appear.

Still, she doubted Lightsong would have settled for anyone other than

the very best. She settled back in her chair—which, she noticed, had been crafted for someone of her size. *I should be careful with my questions,* she thought. *I can't ask directly about the deaths of the old God Kings; that would be too obvious.*

"Storyteller," she said. "What do you know of Hallandren history?"

"Much, my queen," he said, bowing his head.

"Tell me of the days before the division between Idris and Hallandren."

"Ah," the man said, reaching into a pocket. He pulled out a handful of sand and began to rub it between his fingers, letting it drop in a soft stream toward the ground, its grains blown slightly in the wind. "Her Majesty wishes one of the *deep* stories, from long before. A story before time began?"

"I wish to know the origins of the Hallandren God Kings."

"Then we begin in the distant haze," the storyteller said, bringing up another hand, letting powdery black sand drop from it, mixing with the sand that fell from the first hand. As Siri watched, the black sand turned white, and she cocked her head, smiling at the display.

"The first God King of Hallandren is ancient," Hoid said. "Ancient, yes. Older than kingdoms and cities, older than monarchs and religions. Not older than the mountains, for *they* were already here. Like the knuckles of the sleeping giants below, they formed this valley, where panthers and flowers both make their home.

"We speak of just 'the valley' then, a place before it had a name. The people of Chedesh still dominated the world. They sailed the Inner Sea, coming from the east, and it was they who first discovered this strange land. Their writings are sparse, their empire has long since been taken by the dust, but memory remains. Perhaps you can imagine their surprise upon arriving here? A place with beaches of fine, soft sand, with fruits aplenty, and with strange, alien forests?"

Hoid reached into his robes and pulled out a handful of something else. He began to drop it before him—small green leaves from the fronds of a fern.

"Paradise, they called it," Hoid whispered. "A paradise hidden between the mountains, a land with pleasant rains that never grew cold, a land where succulent food grew spontaneously." He threw the handful of leaves into the air, and in the center of them puffed a burst of colorful dust, like a tiny flameless firework. Deep reds and blues mixed in the air, blowing around him.

"A land of color," he said. "Because of the Tears of Edgli, the striking flowers of such brilliance that could yield dyes that would hold fast in any cloth."

Siri had never really thought about how Hallandren would look to people who came across the Inner Sea. She'd heard stories from the ramblemen who came into Idris, and they spoke of distant places. In other lands, one found parries and steppes, mountains and deserts. But not jungles. Hallandren was unique.

"The First Returned was born during this time," Hoid said, sprinkling a handful of silver glitter into the air before him. "Aboard a ship that was sailing the coast. Returned can now be found in all parts of the world, but the first one—the man whom you call Vo, but we name only by his title—was born here, in the waters of this very bay. He declared the Five Visions. He died a week later.

"The men of his ship founded a kingdom upon these beaches, then called Hanald. Before their arrival, all that had existed in these jungles was the people of Pahn Kahl, more a mere collection of fishing villages than a true kingdom."

The glitter ran out, and Hoid began to drop a powdery brown dirt from his other hand as he reached into another pocket. "Now, you may wonder why I must travel back so far. Should I not speak of the Manywar, of the shattering of kingdoms, of the Five Scholars, of Kalad the Usurper and his phantom army, which some say still hides in these jungles, waiting?

"Those are the events we focus upon, the ones men know the best. To speak only of them, however, is to ignore the history of three hundred years that led up to them. Would there have been a Manywar without knowledge of the Returned? It was a Returned, after all, who predicted the war and prompted Strifelover to attack the kingdoms across the mountains."

"Strifelover?" Siri interrupted.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Hoid said, switching to a black dust. "Strifelover. Another name for Kalad the Usurper."

"That sounds like the name of a Returned."

Hoid nodded. "Indeed," he said. "Kalad *was* Returned, as was Peacegiver, the man who overthrew him and founded Hallandren. We haven't arrived at *that* part yet. We are still back in Hanald, the outpost-become-kingdom founded by the men of the First Returned's crew. They were the ones who chose the First Returned's wife as their queen, then used the Tears of Edgli to

create fantastic dyes which sold for untold riches across the world. This soon became a bustling center of trade."

He removed a handful of flower petals and began to let them fall before him. "The Tears of Edgli. The source of Hallandren wealth. Such small things, so easy to grow here. And yet, this is the only soil where they will live. In other parts of the world, dyes are very difficult to produce. Expensive. Some scholars say that the Manywar was fought over these flower petals, that the kingdoms of Kuth and Huth were destroyed by little drips of color."

The petals fell to the floor.

"But only *some* of the scholars say that, storyteller?" Lightsong said. Siri turned, having almost forgotten that he was with her. "What do the rest say? Why was the Manywar fought in *their* opinions?"

The storyteller fell silent for a moment. And then he pulled out two handfuls and began to release dust of a half-dozen different colors. "Breath, Your Grace. Most agree that the Manywar was not *only* about petals squeezed dry, but a much greater prize. *People* squeezed dry.

"You know, perhaps, that the royal family was growing increasingly interested in the process by which Breath could be used to bring objects to life. Awakening, it was then first being called. It was a fresh and poorly understood art, then. It still is, in many ways. The workings of the souls of men—their power to animate ordinary objects and the dead to life—is something discovered barely four centuries ago. A short time, by the accounting of gods."

"Unlike a court proceeding," Lightsong mumbled, glancing over at the priests who were still talking about sanitation. "Those seem to last an eternity, according to the accounting of this god."

The storyteller didn't break stride at the interruption. "Breath," he said. "The years leading up to the Manywar, those were the days of the Five Scholars and the discovery of new Commands. To some, this was a time of great enlightenment and learning. Others call them the darkest days of men, for it was then we learned to best exploit one another."

He began to drop two handfuls of dust, one bright yellow, the other black. Siri watched, amused. He seemed to be slanting what he said toward her, careful not to offend her Idris sensibilities. What did she really know of Breath? She'd rarely even seen any Awakeners in the court. Even when she did, she didn't really care. The monks had spoken against such things, but, well, she had paid about as much attention to them as she had to her tutors.

"One of the Five Scholars made a discovery," Hoid continued, dropping a handful of white scraps, small torn pieces of paper with writing on them. "Commands. Methods. The means by which a Lifeless could be created from a *single Breath.*

"This, perhaps, seems a small thing to you. But you must look at the past of this kingdom and its founding. Hallandren began with the servants of a Returned and was developed by an expansive mercantile effort. It controlled a uniquely lucrative region which, through the discovery and maintenance of the northern passes—combined with increasingly skillful navigation—was becoming a jewel coveted by the rest of the world."

He paused and his second hand came up, dropping little bits of metal, which fell to the stonework with a sound not unlike falling rain. "And so the war came," he said. "The Five Scholars split, joining different sides. Some kingdoms gained the use of Lifeless while others did not. Some kingdoms had weapons others could only envy.

"To answer the god's question, my story claims one other reason for the Manywar: the ability to create Lifeless so cheaply. Before the discovery of the single-Breath Command, Lifeless took fifty Breaths to make. Extra soldiers—even a Lifeless one—are of limited use if you can gain only one for every fifty men you already have. However, being able to create a Lifeless with a single Breath . . . one for one . . . that will double your troops. And half of them won't need to eat."

The metal stopped falling.

"Lifeless are no stronger than living men," Hoid said. "They are the same. They are not more skilled than living men. They are the same. However, not having to *eat* like regular men? That advantage was enormous. Mix that with their ability to ignore pain and never feel fear . . . and suddenly you had an army that others could not stand against. It was taken even further by Kalad, who was said to have created a new and more powerful type of Lifeless, gaining an advantage even more frightening."

"What kind of new Lifeless?" Siri asked, curious.

"Nobody remembers, Your Majesty," Hoid explained. "The records of that time have been lost. Some say they were burned intentionally. Whatever the true nature of Kalad's Phantoms, they were frightening and terrible—so much so that even though the details have been lost in time, the phantoms themselves live on in our lore. And our curses."

"Do they really still exist out there?" Siri asked, shivering slightly, glancing toward the unseen jungles. "Like the stories say? An unseen army, waiting for Kalad to return and command them again?"

"Alas," Hoid said, "I can tell only stories. As I said, so much from that time is lost to us now."

"But we know of the royal family," Siri said. "They broke away because they didn't agree with what Kalad was doing, right? They saw moral problems with using Lifeless?"

The storyteller hesitated. "Why, yes," he finally said, smiling through his beard. "Yes, they did, Your Majesty."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Psst," Lightsong said, leaning in. "He's lying to you."

"Your Grace," the storyteller said, bowing deeply. "I beg your pardon. There are diverging explanations! Why, I am a teller of stories—all stories."

"And what do other stories say?" Siri asked.

"None of them agree, Your Majesty," Hoid said. "Your people speak of religious indignation and of treachery by Kalad the Usurper. The Pahn Kahl people tell of the royal family working hard to gain powerful Lifeless and Awakeners, then being surprised when their tools turned against them. In Hallandren, they tell of the royal family aligning themselves with Kalad, making him their general and ignoring the will of the people by seeking war with bloodlust."

He looked up, and then began to trail two handfuls of black, burned charcoal. "But time burns away behind us, leaving only ash and memory. That memory passes from mind to mind, then finally to my lips. When all is truth, and all are lies, does it matter if some say the royal family sought to create Lifeless? Your belief is your own."

"Either way, the Returned took control of Hallandren," she said.

"Yes," Hoid said. "And they gave it a new name, a variation on the old one. And yet, some still speak regretfully of the royals who left, bearing the blood of the First Returned to their highlands."

Siri frowned. "Blood of the First Returned?"

"Yes, of course," Hoid said. "It was his wife, pregnant with his child, who became the first queen of this land. You are his descendant."

She sat back.

Lightsong turned, curious. "You didn't know this?" he asked, in a tone lacking his normal flippancy.

She shook her head. "If this fact is known to my people, we do not speak of it."

Lightsong seemed to find that interesting. Down below, the priests were moving on to a different topic—something about security in the city and increasing patrols in the slums.

She smiled, sensing a subtle way to get to the questions she *really* wanted to ask. "That means that the God Kings of Hallandren carried on *without* the blood of the First Returned."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Hoid said, crumbling clay out into the air before him.

"And how many God Kings have there been?"

"Five, Your Majesty," the man said. "Including His Immortal Majesty, Lord Susebron, but not including Peacegiver."

"Five kings," she said. "In three hundred years?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Hoid said, bringing out a handful of golden dust, letting it fall before him. "The dynasty of Hallandren was founded at the conclusion of the Manywar, the first one gaining his Breath and life from Peacegiver himself, who was revered for dispelling Kalad's Phantoms and bringing a peaceful end to the Manywar. Since that day, each God King has fathered a stillborn son who then Returned and took his place."

Siri leaned forward. "Wait. How did Peacegiver create a new God King?"

"Ah," Hoid said, switching back to sand with his left hand. "Now *there* is a story lost in time. How indeed? Breath can be passed from one man to another, but Breath—no matter how much—does not make one a god. Legends say that Peacegiver died by granting his Breath to his successor. After all, can a god not give his life away to bless another?"

"Not exactly a sign of mental stability, in my opinion," Lightsong said, waving for some more grapes. "You don't encourage confidence in our predecessors, storyteller. Besides, even if a god gives away his Breath, it doesn't make the recipient divine."

"I only tell stories, Your Grace," Hoid repeated. "They may be truths, they may be fictions. All I know is that the stories themselves exist and that I must tell them."

With as much flair as possible, Siri thought, watching him reach into yet another pocket and pull free a handful of small bits of grass and earth. He let bits fall slowly between his fingers.

"I speak of foundations, Your Grace," Hoid said. "Peacegiver was no ordinary Returned, for he managed to stop the Lifeless from rampaging. Indeed, he sent away Kalad's Phantoms, which formed the main bulk of the Hallandren army. By doing so, he left his own people powerless. He did so in an effort to bring peace. By then, of course, it was too late for Kuth and Huth. However, the other kingdoms—Pahn Kahl, Tedradel, Gys, and Hallandren itself—were brought out of the conflict.

"Can we not assume more from this god of gods who was able to accomplish so much? Perhaps he *did* do something unique, as the priests claim. Leave some seed within the God Kings of Hallandren, allowing them to pass their power and divinity from father to son?"

Heritage which would give them a claim to rule, Siri thought, idly slipping a sliced grape into her mouth. *With such an amazing god as their progenitor, they could become God Kings. And the only one who could threaten them would be . . .*

The royal family of Idris, who can apparently trace their line back to the First Returned. Another heritage of divinity, a challenger for rightful rule in Hallandren.

That didn't tell her how the God Kings had died. Nor did it tell her why some gods—such as the First Returned—could bear children, while others could not.

"They're immortal, correct?" Siri asked.

Hoid nodded, smoothly dropping the rest of his grass and dirt, moving into a different discussion by bringing forth a handful of white powder. "Indeed, Your Majesty. Like all Returned, the God Kings do not age. Agelessness is a gift for all who reach the Fifth Heightening."

"But why have there been five God Kings?" she asked. "Why did the first one die?"

"Why do any Returned pass on, Your Majesty?" Hoid asked.

"Because they are loony," Lightsong said.

The storyteller smiled. "Because they tire. Gods are not like ordinary men. They come back for *us,* not for themselves, and when they can no longer endure life, they pass on. God Kings live only as long as it takes them to produce an heir."

Siri started. "That's commonly known?" she asked, then cringed slightly at the potentially suspicious comment.

"Of course it is, Your Majesty," the storyteller said. "At least, to storytellers and scholars. Each God King has passed from this world shortly after his son and heir was born. It is natural. Once the heir has arrived, the God King grows restless. Each one has sought out an opportunity to use up his Breath to benefit the realm. And then . . ."

He threw up a hand, snapping his fingers, throwing up a little spray of water, which puffed to mist.

"And then they pass on," he said. "Leaving their people blessed and their heir to rule."

The group fell silent, the mist evaporating in front of Hoid.

"Not exactly the most pleasant thing to inform a newlywed wife, storyteller," Lightsong noted. "That her husband is going to grow bored with life as soon as she bears him a son?"

"I seek not to be charming, Your Grace," Hoid said, bowing. At his feet, the various dusts, sands, and glitters mixed together in the faint breeze. "I only tell stories. This one is known to most. I should think that Her Majesty would like to be aware of it as well."

"Thank you," Siri said quietly. "It was good of you to speak of it. Tell me, where did you learn such an . . . unusual method of storytelling?"

Hoid looked up, smiling. "I learned it many, many years ago from a man who didn't know who he was, Your Majesty. It was a distant place where two lands meet and gods have died. But that is unimportant."

Siri ascribed the vague explanation to Hoid's desire to create a suitably romantic and mysterious past for himself. Of far more interest to her was what he'd said about the God Kings' deaths.

So there is an official explanation, she thought, stomach twisting. *And it's actually a pretty good one. Theologically, it makes sense that the God Kings would depart once they had arranged for a suitable successor.*

But that doesn't explain how Peacegiver's Treasure—that wealth of Breath—passes from God King to God King when they have no tongues. And it doesn't explain why a man like Susebron would get tired of life when he seems so excited by it.

The official story would work fine for those who didn't know the God King. It fell flat for Siri. Susebron would never do such a thing. Not now.

Yet . . . Would things change if she bore him a son? Would Susebron grow tired of her that easily?

"Maybe we should be *hoping* for old Susebron to pass, my queen," Lightsong said idly, picking at the grapes. "You were forced into all this, I suspect. If Susebron died, you might even be able to go home. No harm done, people healed, new heir on the throne. Everyone is either happy or dead."

The priests continued to argue below. Hoid bowed, waiting for dismissal.

Happy . . . or dead. Her stomach twisted. "Excuse me," she said, rising. "I would like to walk about a bit. Thank you for your storytelling, Hoid."

With that—entourage in tow—she quickly left the pavilion, preferring that Lightsong not see her tears.

33

Jewels worked quietly, ignoring Vivenna and pulling another stitch tight. Clod's guts—intestines, stomach, and some other things Vivenna didn't want to identify—lay on the floor beside him, carefully pulled out and arranged so that they could be repaired. Jewels was working on the intestines at the moment, sewing with a special thick thread and curved needle.

It was gruesome. And yet it didn't really affect Vivenna, not after the shock she'd had earlier. They were in the safe house. Tonk Fah had gone to scout the regular house to see if Parlin was all right. Denth was downstairs, fetching something.

Vivenna sat on the floor. She'd changed to a long dress, purchased on the way—her skirt was filthy from its time in the mud—and she sat with legs pulled up against her chest. Jewels continued to ignore Vivenna, working atop a sheet on the floor. She was muttering to herself, still angry. "Stupid thing," Jewels said under her breath. "Can't believe we let you get hurt like this just to protect *her*."

Hurt. Did that even mean anything to a creature like Clod? He was awake; she could see that his eyes were open. What was the point of sewing up his insides? Would they heal? He didn't need to eat. Why bother with intestines? Vivenna shivered, looking away. She felt, in a way, as if her own insides had been ripped out. Exposed. For the world to see.

Vivenna closed her eyes. Hours later, and she was *still* shaking from the terror of huddling in that alleyway, thinking that she'd be dead in a moment.

What had she learned about herself when finally threatened? Modesty had meant nothing—she'd pulled off her skirt rather than let it trip her again. Her hair had meant nothing; she'd ignored it as soon as the danger arrived. Her religion, apparently, meant nothing. Not that she'd been able to use the Breath—she hadn't even managed to commit blasphemy successfully.

"I'm half-tempted to just leave," Jewels muttered. "You and I. Go away."

Clod began to shuffle, and Vivenna opened her eyes to see him trying to stand up, even though his insides were hanging out.

Jewels swore. "Lie back down," she hissed, barely audible. "Colors-cursed thing. Howl of the sun. Go inactive. Howl of the sun."

Vivenna watched as Clod lay down and then stopped moving. *They might obey commands,* she thought. *But they aren't very smart. It tried to walk out, obeying Jewels's apparent Command to "go away."* And what was that nonsense Jewels had said about the sun? Was that one of the security phrases Denth had mentioned?

Vivenna heard footsteps on the stairs leading down to the cellar, and then the door opened and Denth appeared. He closed the door, then came over and handed Jewels something that looked like a large wineskin. The woman took it and immediately turned back to her work.

Denth walked over and sat down beside Vivenna.

"They say a man doesn't know himself until he faces death for the first time," he said in a conversational tone. "I don't know about that. It seems to me that the person you are when you're about to die isn't as important as the person you are during the rest of your life. Why should a few moments matter more than an entire lifetime?"

Vivenna didn't respond.

"Everyone gets scared, Princess. Even brave men sometimes run the first time they see battle. In armies, that's why there's so much training. The ones who hold aren't the courageous ones, they're the well-trained ones. We have instincts like any other animal. They take over sometimes. That's all right."

Vivenna continued to watch as Jewels carefully placed the intestines back into Clod's belly. She took out a small package and removed something that looked like a strip of meat.

"You did well, actually," Denth said. "Kept your wits about you. Didn't freeze. Found the quickest way out. I've protected some people who will just stand there and die unless you shake them and force them to run."

"I want you to teach me Awakening," Vivenna whispered.

He started, glancing at her. "Do you . . . want to think about that a bit first?"

"I have," she whispered, arms around knees, chin resting against them. "I thought I was stronger than I am. I thought I'd rather die than use it. That was a lie. In that moment, I would have done *anything* to survive."

Denth smiled. "You'd make a good mercenary."

"It's wrong," she said, still staring forward. "But I can't claim to be pure anymore. I might as well understand what I have. Use it. If that damns me, then so be it. At least it will have helped me survive long enough to destroy the Hallandren."

Denth raised an eyebrow. "You want to *destroy* them now, eh? No more simple sabotage and undermining?"

She shook her head. "I want this kingdom overthrown," she whispered. "Just like the slumlords said. It can corrupt those poor people. It can corrupt even me. I hate it."

"I—"

"No, Denth," Vivenna said. Her hair bled to a deep red, and for once she didn't care. "I *really* hate it. I've always hated this people. They took my childhood. I had to prepare. Become their queen. Get ready to marry their God King. Everyone said he was unholy and a heretic. Yet *I* was supposed to have sex with him!

"I hate this entire city, with its colors and its gods! I hate the fact that it stole away my life, then demanded that I leave behind all that I love! I hate the busy streets, the placating gardens, the commerce, and the suffocating weather.

"I hate their arrogance most of all. Thinking they could push my father around, force him into that treaty twenty years ago. They've controlled my life. Dominated it. *Ruined* it. And now they have my sister."

She drew in a deep breath through gritted teeth.

"You'll have your vengeance, Princess," Denth whispered.

She looked at him. "I want them to hurt, Denth. The attack today wasn't about subduing a rebellious element. The Hallandren sent those soldiers in to kill. Kill the poor that *they* created. We're going to stop them from doing things like that. I don't care what it takes. I'm tired of being pretty and nice and ignoring ostentation. I want to *do* something."

Denth nodded slowly. "All right. We'll change course, start making our attacks a little more painful."

"Good," she said. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling frustrated, wishing that she was strong enough to keep all of these emotions away. But she wasn't. She'd kept them in too long. That was the problem.

"This was never about your sister, was it?" Denth asked. "Coming here?"

She shook her head, eyes still shut.

"Why, then?"

"I had trained all of my life," she whispered. "I was the one who would sacrifice herself. When Siri left in my place, I became nothing. I had to come and get it back."

"But you just said that you've always hated Hallandren," he said, sounding confused.

"I have. And I do. That's why I had to come."

He was silent for a few moments. "Too complicated for a mercenary, I guess."

She opened her eyes. She wasn't sure if she understood, either. She'd always kept a firm grip on her hatred, only letting it manifest in disdain for Hallandren and its ways. She confronted the hatred now. Acknowledged it. Somehow, Hallandren could be loathsome yet enticing at the same time. It was as if . . . she knew that until she came and saw the place for herself, she wouldn't have a real focus—a real understanding, a real image—of what it was that had destroyed her life.

Now she understood. If her Breaths would help, then she would use them. Just like Lemex. Just like those slumlords. She wasn't above that. She never had been.

She doubted Denth would understand. Instead, Vivenna nodded toward Jewels. "What is she doing?"

Denth turned. "Attaching a new muscle," he said. "One of the ones in his side got cut, sheared right through. Muscles won't work right if you just sew them together. She has to replace the whole thing."

"With screws?"

Denth nodded. "Right into the bone. It works all right. Not perfectly, but all right. No wound can ever be *perfectly* fixed on a Lifeless, though he will heal some. You just sew them up and pump them full of fresh ichor-alcohol. If you fix them enough times, the body will stop working right and

you'll have to spend another Breath to keep them going. By then, it's usually just best to buy another body."

Saved by a monster. Perhaps that was what made her so determined to use her Breath. She should be dead, but Clod had saved her. A Lifeless. She owed her life to something that should not exist. Even worse, if she looked deep within herself, she found herself feeling a traitorous pity for the thing. Even an affection. Considering that, she figured that she was already damned to the point where using her Breaths wouldn't matter.

"He fought well," she whispered. "Better than the Lifeless that the city guard was using."

Denth glanced at Clod. "They're not all equal. Most Lifeless, they're just made out of whatever body happens to be around. If you pay good money, you can get one who was very skillful in life."

She felt a chill, remembering then that moment of humanity she'd seen on Clod's face as he defended her. If an undead monstrosity could be a hero, then a pious princess could blaspheme. Or was she still just trying to justify her actions?

"Skill," she whispered. "They keep it?"

Denth nodded. "Some semblance of it, at least. Considering what we paid for this guy, he'd must have been quite the soldier. And that's why it's worth the money, time, and trouble to repair him, rather than buy a new Lifeless."

They treat him just like a thing, Vivenna thought. Just as she should. And yet, more and more, she thought of Clod as a "he." He had saved her life. Not Denth, not Tonk Fah. Clod. It seemed to her that they should show more respect for him.

Jewels finished with the muscles, then sewed the skin closed with a thick string.

"Though he'll kind of heal," Denth said, "it's best to use something strong in the repair, so the wound doesn't rip apart again."

Vivenna nodded. "And the . . . juice."

"Ichor-alcohol," Denth said. "Discovered by the Five Scholars. Wonderful stuff. Keeps a Lifeless going really well."

"That's what let the Manywar occur?" she whispered. "Getting the mixture right?"

"That's part of it. That and the discovery—again by one of the Five

Scholars, I forget which one—of some new Commands. If you really want to be an Awakener, Princess, that's what you have to learn. The Commands."

She nodded. "Teach me."

To the side Jewels got out a small pump and attached a small hose to a little valve at the base of Clod's neck. She began to pump the ichor-alcohol, moving the pump very slowly, probably in order to keep from bursting the blood vessels.

"Well," Denth said, "there are a *lot* of Commands. If you want to bring a rope to life—like that one you tried to use back in the alleyway—a good Command is 'hold things.' Speak it with a clear voice, willing your Breath to act. If you do it right, the rope will grab whatever is closest. 'Protect me' is another good one, though it can be interpreted in fairly strange ways if you don't imagine exactly what you want."

"Imagine?" Vivenna asked.

He nodded. "You have to form the Command in your head, not just speak it. The Breath you give up, it's part of your life. Your soul, you Idrians would say. When you Awaken something, it becomes part of you. If you're good—and practiced—the things you Awaken will do what you expect of them. They're part of you. They understand, just like your hands understand what you want them to do."

"I'll start practicing, then," she said.

He nodded. "You should pick it up fairly quickly. You're a clever woman, and you have a lot of Breaths."

"That makes a difference?"

He nodded, looking somewhat distant. As if distracted by his own thoughts. "The more Breaths you hold when you start, the easier it is for you to learn how to Awaken. It's like . . . I don't know, the Breath is more part of you. Or you're more part of it."

She sat back, contemplating that. "Thank you," she finally said.

"What? For explaining Awakening? Half the children on the streets could have told you that much."

"No," she said. "Though I appreciate the instruction, the thanks is for other things. For not condemning me as a hypocrite. For being willing to change plans and take risks. For protecting me today."

"Last I checked, those were all the things a good employee should do. At least if that employee is a mercenary."

She shook her head. "It's more than that. You're a good man, Denth."

He met her eyes, and she could see something in them. An emotion she couldn't describe. Again, she thought of the mask he wore—the persona of the laughing, joking mercenary. That man seemed just a front, when she looked into those eyes, and saw so much more.

"A good man," he said, turning away. "Sometimes, I wish that were still true, Princess. I haven't been a good man for some years now."

She opened her mouth to reply, but something made her hesitate. Outside, a shadow passed the window. Tonk Fah entered a few moments later. Denth stood up without glancing at her. "Well?" he asked Tonk Fah.

"Looks safe," Tonk Fah said, eyeing Clod. "How's the stiff?"

"Just finished," Jewels said. She leaned down, saying something very soft to the Lifeless. Clod started moving again, sitting up, looking about. Vivenna waited as his eyes passed over her, but there didn't seem to be recognition in them. He wore the same dull expression.

Of course, Vivenna thought, standing. *He's Lifeless, after all.* Jewels had said something to make him start working again. It was probably the same thing Jewels had used to make him stop moving in the first place. That odd phrase . . .

Howl of the sun. Vivenna filed it away, then followed as they left the building.

A SHORT TIME LATER, they were home. Parlin rushed out, expressing his fears for their safety. He went to Jewels first, though she brushed him off. As Vivenna entered the building, he moved up to her. "Vivenna? What happened?"

She just shook her head.

"There was fighting," he said, following her up the stairs. "I heard about it."

"There was an attack on the camp we visited," Vivenna said wearily, reaching the top of the stairs. "A squad of Lifeless. They started killing people."

"Lord of Colors!" Parlin said. "Is Jewels all right?"

Vivenna flushed, turning on the landing, looking down the stairs toward him. "Why do you ask about *her*?"

Parlin shrugged. "I think she's nice."

"Should you be saying things like that?" Vivenna asked, noticing half-heartedly that her hair was turning red again. "Aren't you engaged to *me*?"

He frowned. "You were engaged to the God King, Vivenna."

"But you know what our fathers wanted," she said, hands on hips.

"I did," Parlin said. "But, well, when we left Idris, I figured we were both going to get disinherited. There's really no reason to keep up the charade."

Charade?

"I mean, let's be honest, Vivenna," he said, smiling. "You really haven't ever been that nice to me. I know you think I'm stupid; I guess you're probably right. But if you really cared, I figured that you wouldn't make me *feel* stupid, too. Jewels grumbles at me, but she laughs at my jokes sometimes. You've never done that."

"But . . ." Vivenna said, finding herself at a slight loss for words. "But why did you follow me down to Hallandren?"

He blinked. "Well, for Siri, of course. Isn't that why we came? To rescue her?" He smiled fondly, then shrugged. "Good night, Vivenna." He trailed down the steps, calling to Jewels to see if she was hurt.

Vivenna watched him go.

He's twice the person I am, she thought with shame, turning toward her room. *But I'm just finding it hard to care anymore.* Everything had been taken from her. Why not Parlin, too? Her hatred for Hallandren grew a little more firm as she stepped into her room.

I just need to sleep, she thought. *Maybe after that, I can figure out just what in the name of the Colors I'm doing in this city.*

Of one thing remained firm. She was going to learn how to Awaken. The Vivenna from before—the one who had a right to stand tall and denounce Breath as unholy—no longer had a place in T'Telir. The real Vivenna hadn't come to Hallandren to save her sister. She'd come because she couldn't stand being unimportant.

She'd learn. That was her punishment.

Inside her room, she pushed the door closed, locking the bolt. Then she walked over to pull the drapes closed.

A figure stood on her balcony, resting easily against the railing. He wore several days' worth of stubble on his face and his dark clothing was worn, almost tattered. He carried a deep black sword.

Vivenna jumped, eyes wide.

"You," he said in an angry voice, "are causing a lot of trouble."

She opened her mouth to scream, but the drapes snapped forward, muffling her neck and mouth. They squeezed tightly, choking her. They wrapped around her entire body, pinning her arms to her sides.

No! she thought. *I survive the attack and the Lifeless, and then fall in my own room?*

She struggled, hoping someone would hear her thrashing and come for her. But nobody did. At least, not before she fell unconscious.

34

Lightsong watched the young queen dart away from his pavilion and felt an odd sense of guilt. *How very uncharacteristic of me,* he thought, taking a sip of wine. After the grapes, it tasted a little sour.

Maybe the sourness was from something else. He'd spoken to Siri about the God King's death in his usual flippant way. In his opinion, it was usually best for people to hear the truth bluntly—and, if possible, amusingly.

He hadn't expected such a reaction from the queen. What was the God King to her? She'd been sent to be his bride, probably against her will. Yet she seemed to take the prospect of his death with grief. He eyed her appraisingly as she fled.

Such a small, young thing she was, all dressed up in gold and blue. *Young?* he thought. *Yet she's been alive longer than I have.*

He retained some things from his former life—such as his perception of his own age. He didn't feel like he was five. He felt far older. That age should have taught him to hold his tongue when speaking of making widows out of young women. Could the girl actually have feelings for the God King?

She'd been in the city for only a couple of months, and he knew—through rumors—what her life must be like. Forced to perform her duty as a wife for a man to whom she could not speak and whom she could not know. A man who represented all the things that her culture taught were profane. The only thing Lightsong could suppose, then, was that she was worried about what might

happen to her if her husband killed himself. A legitimate worry. The queen would lose most of her stature if she lost her husband.

Lightsong nodded to himself, turning to look down at the arguing priests. They were done with sewage and guard patrols and had moved on to other topics. "We *must* prepare ourselves for war," one of them was saying. "Recent events make it clear that we cannot coexist with the Idrians with any assurance of peace or security. This conflict will come, whether we wish it or not."

Lightsong sat listening, tapping one finger against the arm rest of his chair.

For five years, I've been irrelevant, he thought. *I didn't have a vote on any of the important court councils, I simply held the codes to a division of the Lifeless. I've crafted a divine reputation of being useless.*

The tone below was even more hostile than it had been during previous meetings. That wasn't what worried him. The problem was the priest spearheading the movement for war. Nanrovah, high priest of Stillmark the Noble. Normally, Lightsong wouldn't have bothered paying attention. Yet Nanrovah had always been the most outspoken *against* war.

What had made him change his mind?

It wasn't long before Blushweaver made her way to his box. By the time she arrived, Lightsong's taste for the wine had returned, and he was sipping thoughtfully. The voices against war from below were soft and infrequent.

Blushweaver sat beside him, a rustle of cloth and a waft of perfume. Lightsong didn't look toward her.

"How did you get to Nanrovah?" he finally asked.

"I didn't," Blushweaver said. "I don't know why he changed his mind. I wish he hadn't done it so quickly—it seems suspicious and makes people think I manipulated him. Either way, I'll take the support."

"You wish for war so much?"

"I wish for our people to be aware of the threat," Blushweaver said. "You think I *want* this to happen? You think I want to send our people to die and to kill?"

Lightsong looked at her, judging her sincerity. She had such beautiful eyes. One rarely noticed that, considering how she proffered the rest of her assets so blatantly. "No," he said. "I don't think you want a war."

She nodded sharply. Her dress was sleek and trim this day, as always, but it was particularly revealing up top, where her breasts were pressed up and forward, demanding attention. Lightsong looked away.

"You're boring today," Blushweaver said.

"I'm distracted."

"We should be happy," Blushweaver said. "The priests have almost all come around. Soon there will be a call for attack made to the main assembly of gods."

Lightsong nodded. The main assembly of gods was called to deliberate only in the most important of situations. In that case, they all had a vote. If the vote was for war, the gods with Lifeless Commands—gods like Lightsong—would be called upon to administrate and lead the battle.

"You've changed the Commands on Hopefinder's ten thousand?" Lightsong asked.

She nodded. "They're mine now, as are Mercystar's."

Colors, he thought. *Between the two of us, we now control three-quarters of the kingdom's armies.*

What in the name of the Iridescent Tones am I getting myself into?

Blushweaver settled back in her chair, eyeing the smaller one that Siri had vacated. "I am annoyed, however, at Allmother."

"Because she's prettier than you, or because she's smarter?"

Blushweaver didn't dignify that with a verbal response; she just shot him a look of annoyance.

"Just trying to act less boring, my dear," he said.

"Allmother controls the last group of Lifeless," Blushweaver said.

"An odd choice, don't you think?" Lightsong said. "I mean, *I* am a logical choice—assuming you don't know me, of course—since I'm supposedly bold. Hopefinder represents justice, a nice mix with soldiers. Even Mercystar, who represents benevolence, makes a kind of sense for one who controls soldiers. But Allmother? Goddess of matrons and families? Giving her ten thousand Lifeless is enough to make even me consider my drunk-monkey theory."

"The one who chooses names and titles of the Returned?"

"Exactly," Lightsong said. "I've actually considered expanding the theory. I am now proposing to believe that God—or the universe, or time, or whatever you think controls all of this—is *all* really just a drunk monkey."

She leaned over, squeezing her arms together, seriously threatening to pop her bosom out the front of her dress. "And, you think *my* title was chosen by happenstance? Goddess of honesty and interpersonal relations. Seems to fit, wouldn't you say?"

He hesitated. Then he smiled. "My dear, did you just try to prove the existence of God with your cleavage?"

She smiled. "You'd be surprised what a good wriggle of the chest can accomplish."

"Hum. I'd never considered the theological power of your breasts, my dear. If there were a Church devoted to them, perhaps you'd make a theist out of me after all. Regardless, are you going to tell me what specifically Allmother did to annoy you?"

"She won't give me her Lifeless Commands."

"Not surprising," Lightsong said. "*I* hardly trust you, and I'm your friend."

"We need those security phrases, Lightsong."

"Why?" he asked. "We've got three of the four—we dominate the armies already."

"We can't afford infighting or divisiveness," Blushweaver said. "If her ten were to turn against our thirty, we'd win, but we'd be left badly weakened."

He frowned. "Surely she wouldn't do that."

"Surely we'd rather be certain."

Lightsong sighed. "Very well, then. I'll talk to her."

"That might not be a good idea."

He raised an eyebrow.

"She doesn't like you very much."

"Yes, I know," he said. "She has remarkably good taste. Unlike some other people I know."

She glared at him. "Do I need to wriggle my breasts at you again?"

"No, please. I don't know if I'd be able to stand the theological debate that would follow."

"All right, then," she said, sitting back, looking down at the priests who were still arguing.

They sure are taking a long time on this one, he thought. He glanced toward the other side, where Siri had paused to look out over the arena, her arms resting on the stonework; it was too high for her to do so comfortably.

Perhaps it wasn't thinking of her husband's death that bothered her, he thought. *Maybe it was because the discussion turned to war.*

A war her people couldn't win. That was another good reason why the conflict was becoming inevitable. As Hoid had implied, when one side had an unbeatable advantage, war was the result. Hallandren had been building

its Lifeless armies for centuries, and the size was becoming daunting. Hallandren had less and less to lose from an attack. He should have realized that earlier, rather than assuming this would all blow over once the new queen arrived.

Blushweaver huffed beside him, and he noticed that *she* had noticed his study of Siri. She was watching the queen with obvious dislike.

Lightsong immediately changed the topic. "Do you know anything about a tunnel complex beneath the Court of Gods?"

Blushweaver turned back toward him, shrugging. "Sure. Some of the palaces have tunnels beneath them, places for storage and the like."

"Have you ever been down in any of them?"

"Please. Why would I go crawling about in storage tunnels? I only know about them because of my high priestess. When she joined my service, she asked me if I wanted mine connected to the main complex of tunnels. I said I didn't."

"Because you didn't want others to have access to your palace?"

"No," she said, turning back to watching the priests below. "Because I didn't want to put up with the racket of all that digging. Can I have some more wine, please?"

Siri watched the proceedings for quite a long time. She felt a little like Lightsong said he did. Because she didn't have a say about what the court did, it was frustrating to pay attention. Yet she wanted to know. The arguments of the priests were, in a way, her only connection to the outside world.

She was not encouraged by what she heard. As the time passed, the sun falling close to the horizon and servants lighting massive torches along the walkway, Siri found herself feeling more and more daunted. Her husband was probably either going to be killed or persuaded to kill himself in the upcoming year. Her homeland, in turn, was about to be invaded by the very kingdom her husband ruled—yet he could do nothing to stop it because he had no way to communicate.

Then there was the guilt she felt for actually *enjoying* all the challenges and problems. Back home, she'd had to be contrary and disobedient to find

any kind of excitement. Here she only had to stand and watch, and things would begin to topple against each other and cause a clatter. There was far *too* much clatter at present, but that didn't stop her from thrilling at her part in it.

Silly fool, she told herself. *Everything you love is in danger and you're thinking about how exciting it is?*

She needed to find a way to help Susebron. In doing so, perhaps she could bring him out from beneath the oppressive control of the priests. Then he might be able to do something to help her homeland. As she followed that line of thought, she almost missed a comment from below. It was spoken by one of the priests most strongly in favor of attacking.

"Have you not heard of the Idrian agent who has been causing havoc in the city?" the priest asked. "The Idrians are preparing for the war! *They* know that a conflict is inevitable and so they've begun to work against us!"

Siri perked up. *Idrian agents in the city?*

"Bah," said another of the priests. "The 'infiltrator' you speak of is said to be a princess of the royal family. That's obviously a story for the common people. Why would a princess come in secret to T'Telir? Theses stories are ridiculous and unfounded."

Siri grimaced. That, at least, was obviously true. Her sisters were not the types to come and work as "Idrian agents." She smiled, imagining her soft-spoken monk of a sister—or even Vivenna in her prim outfits and stony attitude—coming to T'Telir in secret. Part of her had a little trouble believing that Vivenna had really been intended to become Susebron's bride. Starchy Vivenna? Having to deal with the exotic court and the wild costumes?

Vivenna's stoic coldness would never have coaxed Susebron out of his imperial mask. Vivenna's obvious disapproval would have alienated her from gods like Lightsong. Vivenna would have hated wearing the beautiful dresses and would never have appreciated the colors and variety in the city. Siri might not have been ideal for the position, but she was slowly coming to realize that Vivenna hadn't been a good choice either.

A group of people was approaching along the walkway. Siri remained where she was; she was too distracted by her thoughts to pay much attention.

"Are they talking about a relative of yours?" a voice asked.

Siri started, spinning. Behind her stood a dark-haired goddess wearing a

lavish—and revealing—gown of green and silver. Like most of the gods, she stood a good head taller than a mortal person, and she looked down at Siri with a raised eyebrow.

"Your . . . Grace?" Siri responded, confused.

"They're discussing the famous hidden princess," the goddess said with a wave of her hand. "She'd be a relative of yours, if she really does have the Royal Locks."

Siri glanced back at the priests. "They must be mistaken. I'm the only princess here."

"The stories of her are quite pervasive."

Siri fell silent.

"My Lightsong has taken a liking to you, Princess," the goddess said, folding her arms.

"He has been very kind to me," Siri said carefully, trying to present the right image—that of the person she was, only less threatening. A little more confused. "Might I ask which goddess you are, Your Grace?"

"I am Blushweaver," the goddess said.

"I am pleased to meet you."

"No you aren't," Blushweaver said. She leaned in, eyes narrowing. "I don't like what you're doing here."

"Excuse me?"

Blushweaver raised a finger. "He's a better man than any of us, *Princess.* Don't you go spoiling him and pulling him into your schemes."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You don't fool me with your false naïveté," Blushweaver said. "Lightsong is a good person—one of the last ones we have left in this court. If you taint him, I will destroy you. Do you understand?"

Siri nodded dumbly; then Blushweaver turned and moved away, muttering, "Find someone else's bed to climb into, you little slut."

Siri watched her go, shocked. When she finally regained her composure, she blushed furiously, then fled.

By the time she got back to the palace, Siri was quite ready for her bath. She entered the bathing chamber, letting her serving women undress her.

They retreated with the clothing, then exited to prepare the evening's gown. That left Siri in the hands of a group of lesser attendants, the ones whose job it was to follow her into the massive tub and scrub her clean.

Siri relaxed and leaned back, sighing as the women went to work. Another group—standing fully clothed in the deep water—pulled her hair straight then cut most of it free, something she'd ordered them to do every night.

For a few moments, Siri floated and let herself forget the threats to her people and her husband. She even let herself forget Blushweaver and her snappish misunderstanding. She just enjoyed the heat and the scents of the perfumed water.

"You wanted to speak with me, My Queen?" a voice asked.

Siri started, splashing as she dunked her body beneath the water. "Bluefingers," she snapped. "I thought we'd cleared this up on the first day!"

He stood at he rim of the tub, fingers blue, typically anxious as he began to pace. "Oh, please," he said. "I have daughters twice your age. You sent word that you wanted to talk to me. Well, this is where I will talk. Away from random ears."

He nodded to several of the serving girls, and they began to splash just a bit more, speaking quietly, creating a low noise. Siri flushed, her short hair a deep red—though a few cut-off strands that floated in the water remained blond.

"Haven't you gotten over your shyness yet?" Bluefingers asked. "You've been in Hallandren for months."

Siri eyed him, but didn't relax her concealing posture, even if she did let the serving women continue to work on her hair and scrub her back. "Won't it seem suspicious to have the serving women making so much noise?" she asked.

Bluefingers waved a hand. "They're already considered second-class servants by most in the palace." She understood what he meant. These women, as opposed to her regular servants, wore brown. They were from Pahn Kahl.

"You sent me a message earlier," Bluefingers said. "What did you mean by claiming to have information relating to my plans?"

Siri bit her lip, sorting through the dozens of ideas she had considered, discarding them all. What did she know? How could she make Bluefingers willing to trade?

He gave me clues, she thought. *He tried to scare me into not sleeping with*

the king. But he had no reason to help me. He barely knew me. He must have other motives for not wanting an heir to be born.

"What happens when a new God King takes the throne?" she asked carefully.

He eyed her. "So you've figured that out, then?"

Figured out what? "Of course I have," she said out loud.

He wrung his hands nervously. "Of course, of course. Then you can see why I'm so nervous? We worked hard to get me where I am. It isn't easy for a Pahn Kahl man to rise high in the theocracy of Hallandren. Once I got into place, I worked so hard to provide work for my people. The serving girls who wash you, they have far better lives than the Pahn Kahl who work the dye fields. That will all be lost. We don't believe in their gods. Why would we be treated as well as people of their own faith?"

"I still don't see why it has to happen," Siri said carefully.

He waved a nervous hand. "Of course it doesn't *have* to, but tradition is tradition. The Hallandren are very lax in every area but religion. When a new God King is chosen, his servants are replaced. They won't kill us to send us into the afterlife along with our lord—that horrid custom hasn't been in effect since the days before the Manywar—but we *will* be dismissed. A new God King represents a fresh start."

He stopped pacing, looking at her. She was still naked in the water, awkwardly covering herself as best she could. "But," he said, "I guess my job security is the lesser of our problems."

Siri snorted. "Don't tell me you're worried about *my* safety above your own place in the palace."

"Of course not," he said, kneeling down beside the tub, speaking quietly. "But the God King's life . . . well, that worries me."

"So," Siri said, "I haven't been able to decide yet. Do the God Kings give up their lives willingly once they have an heir, or are they coerced into it?"

"I'm not sure," Bluefingers admitted. "There are stories, spoken of by my people regarding the last God King's death. They say that the plague he cured—well, he wasn't even in the city when the 'curing' happened. My suspicion is that they somehow coerced him to give up his Breaths to his son and that killed him."

He doesn't know, Siri thought. *He doesn't realize that Susebron is a mute.* "How closely have you served the God King?"

He shrugged. "As close as any servant considered unholy. I'm not allowed to touch him or speak to him. But, Princess, I've *served* him all my life. He's not my god, but he's something better. I think these priests look upon their gods as placeholders. It doesn't really matter to them who is holding the station. Me, I've served His Majesty for my entire life. I was hired by the palace as a lad and I remember Susebron's childhood. I cleaned his quarters. He's not my god, but he *is* my liege. And now these priests are planning to kill him."

He turned back to his pacing, wringing his hands. "But there's nothing to be done."

"Yes, there is," she said.

He waved a hand. "I gave you a warning and you ignored it. I know that you've been performing your duties as a wife. Perhaps we could find some way of making certain that no pregnancy of yours comes to term."

Siri flushed. "I would never do such a thing! Austre forbids it."

"Even to save the life of the God King? But . . . of course. What is he to you? Your captor and imprisoner. Yes. Perhaps my warnings were useless."

"I *do* care, Bluefingers," she said. "And I think we can stop this before it gets to the point of worrying about an heir. I've been talking to the God King."

Bluefingers froze, looking directly at her. "What?"

"I've been talking to him," Siri admitted. "He's not as heartless as you might think. I don't think this has to end with him dying or your people losing their places in the palace."

Bluefingers studied her, staring at her to the point that she flushed again, ducking further down into the water.

"I see that you've found yourself a position of power," he noted.

Or, at least, one that looks powerful, she thought ruefully. "If things turn out as I want them to, I'll make certain your people are cared for."

"And my side of the bargain?" he asked.

"If things don't turn out as I want them to," she said, taking a deep breath, heart fluttering, "I want you to get Susebron and me out of the palace."

Silence.

"Deal," he said. "But let us make certain it does not come to that. Is the God King aware of the danger from his own priests?"

"He is," Siri lied. "In fact, he knew about it before I did. He's the one who told me I needed to contact you."

"He did?" Bluefingers asked, frowning slightly.

"Yes," Siri said. "I will be in touch on how to make this turn out well for all of us. And, until then, I would appreciate it if you'd let me get back to my bath."

Bluefingers nodded slowly, then retreated from the bathing chamber. Siri, however, found it hard to still her nerves. She wasn't certain if she'd handled the exchange well or not. She seemed to have gained something. Now she just had to figure out how to use it.

35

Vivenna awoke sore, tired, and terrified. She tried struggling, but her hands and legs were tied. She succeeded only in rolling herself into an even less comfortable position.

She was in a dark room, gagged, her face pressing awkwardly against a splintering wood floor. She still wore her skirt, an expensive foreign one like those that Denth complained about. Her hands were tied behind her.

Someone was in the room with her. Someone with a lot of Breath. She could feel it without even trying. She twisted, rolling onto her back in an awkward motion. She could see a figure silhouetted against a starlit sky, standing on a balcony a short distance away.

It was him.

He turned toward her, face shadowed in the unlit room, and she began to squirm with panic. What was this man planning to do with her? Horrible possibilities leaped to mind.

The man walked toward her, feet thumping roughly on the floor, the wood shaking. He knelt down, pulling her head up by the hair. "I'm still deciding whether or not to kill you, Princess," he said. "If I were you, I'd avoid doing anything more to antagonize me."

His voice was deep, thick, and had an accent she couldn't place. She froze in his grip, trembling, hair bleached white. He appeared to be studying her, eyes reflecting starlight. He dropped her back to the wooden floor.

She groaned through the gag as he lit a lantern, then pushed the balcony

doors closed. He reached to his belt and removed a large hunting dagger. Vivenna felt a stab of fear, but he simply walked over and cut the bonds on her hands.

He tossed the dagger aside, and it made a thock as it stuck into the wood of the far wall. He reached for something on the bed. His large, black-hilted sword.

Vivenna scrambled back, hands free, and pulled at her gag, intending to scream. He whipped the scabbarded sword toward her, making her freeze.

"You will remain quiet," he said sharply.

She huddled back into the corner. *How is this happening to me?* she thought. Why hadn't she fled back to Idris long ago? She'd been deeply unsettled when Denth had killed the ruffians in the restaurant. She'd known then that she was dealing with people and situations that were truly dangerous.

She'd been an arrogant fool to think that she could do anything in this city. This monstrous, overwhelming, terrible city. She was nothing. Barely a peasant from the countryside. Why had she been determined to get herself involved in this people's politics and schemes?

The man, Vasher, stepped forward. He undid the clasp on that deep, black sword, and Vivenna felt a strange nausea strike her. A thin wisp of black smoke began to curl up from the blade.

Vasher approached, backlit by the lantern, the sheathed tip of the sword dragging along the floor behind him. Then he dropped the sword to the floor in front of Vivenna.

"Pick it up," he said.

She untensed slightly, looking up, though she still huddled in the corner. She felt tears on her cheeks.

"Pick up the sword, Princess."

She had no training with weapons, but maybe . . . She reached for the sword, but felt her nausea grow far stronger. She groaned, her hand twitching as it approached the strange black blade.

She shied away.

"*Pick it up!*" Vasher bellowed.

She complied with a gagged cry of desperation, grabbing the weapon, feeling a terrible sickness travel like a wave up her arm and into her stomach. She found herself ripping away her gag with desperate fingers.

Hello, a voice said in her head. *Would you like to kill someone today?*

She dropped the horrid weapon and fell to her knees, retching onto the floor. There wasn't much in her stomach, but she couldn't stop herself. When she was done, she crawled away and huddled down against the wall again, mouth dripping with bile, feeling too sick to yell for help or even wipe her face.

She was crying again. That seemed the least of her humiliations. Through teary eyes, she watched as Vasher stood quietly. Then he grunted—as if in surprise—and picked up the sword. He clicked the clasp on its sheath, locking the weapon back inside, then threw a towel onto what she'd retched up.

"We are in one of the slums," he said. "You may scream if you wish, but nobody will think anything of it. Except me. I'll be annoyed." He glanced back at her. "I warn you. I'm not known for my ability to keep my temper."

Vivenna shivered, still feeling hints of nausea. This man held even more Breath than she did. Yet, when he'd kidnapped her, she hadn't felt anyone standing in her room. How had he hidden it?

And what was that voice?

They seemed silly things to distract her, considering her current situation. However, she used them to keep from thinking about what this man might do to her. What—

He was walking toward her again. He picked up the gag, his expression dark. She finally screamed, trying to scramble away, and he cursed, putting a foot on her back and forcing her down against the floor. He tied her hands again before forcing on the gag. She cried, her voice muffled as he jerked her backward. He stood, then slung her over his shoulder and carried her out of the room.

"Colors-cursed slums," he muttered. "Everyone's too poor to afford cellars." He pushed her into a sitting position in the doorway of a second, much smaller room and retied her hands to the doorknob. He stepped back, looking her over, obviously unsatisfied. Then he knelt beside her, unshaven face close to hers, breath vile. "I have work to do," he said. "Work that *you* have forced me to do. You will not run. If you do, I'll find you and kill you. Understand?"

She nodded weakly.

She caught sight of him retrieving his sword from the other room, then he quickly rushed down the stairs. The door below slammed and locked, leaving her alone and helpless.

An hour or so later, Vivenna had finished crying herself dry. She sat slumped, hands tied awkwardly above her. Part of her kept waiting for the others to find her. Denth, Tonk Fah, Jewels. They were experts. They'd be able to save her.

No rescue came. Dazed, drowsy, and sick though she was, she realized something. This man—this Vasher—was someone that even Denth had feared. Vasher had killed one of their friends some months before. He was at least as skilled as they were.

How did they all end up here, then? she thought, her wrists rubbed raw. *It seems an unlikely coincidence.* Perhaps Vasher had followed Denth to the city and was acting out some kind of twisted rivalry by working against them.

They'll find me and save me.

But she knew that they wouldn't, not if Vasher was as dangerous as they said. He'd know how to hide from Denth. If she was going to escape, she'd have to do it herself. The concept terrified her. Strangely, however, memories from her tutors returned to her.

There are things to do if you are kidnapped, one had taught. *Things that every princess should know.* During her time in T'Telir, she'd begun to feel that her lessons were useless. Now she was surprised to find herself remembering sessions that related directly to her situation.

If a person kidnaps you, the tutor had taught, *your best time to escape is near the beginning, when you are still strong. They will starve you and beat you so that soon you will be too weak to flee. Do not expect to be rescued, though friends will undoubtedly be working to help you. Never expect to be redeemed for a ransom. Most kidnappings end in death.*

The best thing you can do for your country is try to escape. If you don't succeed, then perhaps the captor will kill you. That is preferable to what you might have to endure as a captive. Plus, if you die, the kidnappers will no longer have a hostage.

It was a harsh, blunt lesson—but many of her lessons had been like that. Better to die than to be held captive and used against Idris. That was the same lesson that warned her that the Hallandren might try to use her against Idris once she was there as queen. In such a case, she was told that her father might be forced to order her assassination.

That was a problem she didn't have to worry about anymore. The kidnapping advice, however, seemed useful. It frightened her, made her want to cower in place and simply wait, hoping that Vasher would find a reason to let her go. But the more she thought, the more she knew that she had to be strong.

He'd been extremely harsh with her—exaggeratedly so. He'd wanted to frighten her so that she wouldn't try to escape. He'd cursed not having a cellar, for that would have been a good place to secret her. When he returned, he would probably move her to a more secure location. The tutors were right. The only chance she had to escape was now.

Her hands were bound tightly. She'd tried pulling them free several times already. Vasher knew his knots. She wiggled, rubbing more skin off, and she cringed in pain. Blood began to drip down her wrist, but even that slickness wasn't enough to get her hands free. She began to cry again, not in fear, but in pain and frustration.

She couldn't wiggle her way out. But . . . could she perhaps make the ropes untie themselves?

Why didn't I let Denth train me with Breath sooner?

Her stubborn self-righteousness seemed even more flagrant to her now. Of course it was better to use the Breath than it was to be killed—or worse—by Vasher. She thought she understood Lemex and his desire to gather enough BioChroma to extend his life. She tried to speak some Commands through her gag.

That was useless. Even she knew that the Commands had to be spoken clearly. She began to wiggle her chin, pushing on the gag with her tongue. It didn't appear to be as tight as her wrist bonds. Plus, it was wet from her tears and saliva. She worked at it, moving her lips and her teeth. She was actually surprised when it finally dropped loose below her chin.

She licked her lips, working her sore jaw. *Now what?* she thought. Her apprehension was rising. Now she *really* needed to get free. If Vasher returned and saw that she'd managed to work her gag off, he'd never leave her with such an opportunity again. He might punish her for disobeying him.

"Ropes," she said. "Untie yourself."

Nothing happened.

She gritted her teeth, trying to remember the Commands that Denth had told her. *Hold things* and *Protect me*. Neither seemed all that useful in her situation. She certainly didn't want the ropes to hold her wrists more

tightly. However, he had said something else. Something about imagining what you wanted in your mind. She tried that, picturing the ropes untying themselves.

"Untie yourselves," she said clearly.

Again, nothing happened.

Vivenna leaned her head back in frustration. Awakening seemed such a vague art, which was odd, considering the number of rules and restrictions it appeared to have. Or maybe it just seemed vague to her because it was so complicated.

She closed her eyes. *I have to get this,* she thought. *I must figure it out. If I don't, I will be killed.*

She opened her eyes, focusing on her bonds. She pictured them untying again, but somehow that felt wrong. She was like a child, sitting and staring at a leaf, trying to make it move just by concentrating on it.

That wasn't the way her newfound senses worked. They were part of her. So, instead of concentrating, she relaxed, letting her unconscious mind do the work. A little like she did when she changed the color of her hair.

"Untie," she Commanded.

The Breath flowed from her. It was like blowing bubbles beneath the water, exhaling a piece of herself but feeling it flow into something else. That something else became part of her—a limb she could only slightly control. It was more of a *sense* of the rope than an ability to move it. As the Breath left her, she could feel the world dull, colors becoming slightly less bold, the wind a little more difficult to hear, the life of the city a little more distant. The ropes around her hands jerked, causing her wrists to burn.

Then the ropes unraveled and dropped to the ground. Her arms came free, and she sat, staring at her wrists, shocked.

Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought. *I did it.* She wasn't certain whether to be impressed or ashamed.

Either way, she knew she needed to run. She untied her ankles, then scrambled to her feet, noticing that a section of the wooden door had been completely drained of color in a circular pattern around her hands. She paused only briefly, then grabbed the rope and ran down the stairs. She unlocked the door and peeked out the doorway onto the street, but it was dark, and she could see little.

Taking a deep breath, she rushed out into the night.

SHE WALKED AIMLESSLY for a time, trying to put space between herself and Vasher's lair. She knew that she should probably find a place to hide, but she was afraid. She was distinctive in her fine dress and would be remembered by all who passed. Her only real hope was to get out of the slums and into the city proper, where she could find her way back to Denth and the others.

She carried the rope tucked into the dress's pocket pouch, hidden behind a fold of cloth on the side. She'd grown so accustomed to having a certain amount of Breath that missing a fraction, even the small bit contained in the rope, felt wrong. Awakeners could recover Breath they invested into objects; she'd been tutored on that. She just didn't know the Commands to do it. So she brought the rope, hoping that Denth would be able to help her recover its Breath.

She maintained a quick pace, head down, trying to watch for a discarded cloak or piece of cloth she could wrap around herself to hide the dress. Fortunately, it seemed as if the hour was too late, even, for most ruffians. She did occasionally see shadowed figures on the sides of the road, and she had trouble keeping her heart stilled as she passed them.

If only the sun were up! she thought. It was just beginning to grow light with morning's arrival, but it was still dark enough that she had trouble telling which direction she was going. The slums were convoluted enough that she felt she was going in circles. The tall buildings loomed around her, blocking off the sky. This area had once been much more rich; the shadowed fronts of the buildings held worn engravings and faded colors. The square down the street to her left held an old, broken statue of a man atop a horse, perhaps part of a fountain or—

Vivenna stopped. A broken statue of a horseman. Why did that seem familiar?

Denth's directions, she thought. *When he explained to Parlin how to get from the safe house to the restaurant.* That day, weeks back, seemed so vague to her now. But she did remember the exchange. She'd been worried that Parlin would get lost.

For the first time in hours, she felt a sense of hope. The directions had been simple. Could she remember them? She worked, walking hesitantly,

partially just on instinct. After just a few minutes, she realized that the dark street around her looked familiar. There were no lamps in the slums, but the light of false dawn was enough.

She turned around, and sure enough, the safe house lay huddled between two larger buildings across from her. *Blessed Austre!* she thought with relief, quickly crossing the street and pushing her way into the building. The main room was empty, and she hurriedly opened the door down to the cellar, seeking a place to hide.

She searched around with her fingers, and sure enough, she found a lantern with flint and steel beside the stairway. She pulled the door closed and found it more sturdy than she would have assumed. That felt good, though she couldn't lock it from this side. She left it unlatched and bent down to light the lantern.

A set of worn, broken stairs led down into the cellar. Vivenna paused, remembering that Denth had warned her about the steps. She walked down carefully, feeling them creak beneath her, and could see why he'd been worried. Still, she made it down all right. At the bottom, she wrinkled her nose at the musty scent. The carcasses of several small game hung on the wall; someone had been here recently, which was a good sign.

She rounded the stairs. The main space of the cellar was built beneath the floor of the upper room. She would rest there for a few hours, and if Denth didn't arrive, she'd venture out. Then she—

She froze, jerking to a halt, lantern swinging in her hand. Its unsteady light shone on a figure sitting before her, head bowed, face shadowed. His arms were tied behind his back and his ankles were bound to the legs of the chair.

"Parlin?" Vivenna asked with shock, rushing to his side. She quickly set down the lantern, then froze. There was blood on the floor.

"Parlin!" she said louder, urgently lifting his head. His eyes stared forward, sightless, his face scratched and bloody. Her life sense couldn't feel him. His eyes were dead.

Vivenna's hand began to shake. She stumbled back, horrified. "Oh, Colors," she found herself mumbling. "Colors, Colors, Colors . . ."

A hand fell on her shoulder. She screamed, spinning. A large figure stood in the darkness behind her, half-hidden beneath the stairs.

"Hello, Princess," Tonk Fah said. He smiled.

Vivenna stumbled back, nearly colliding with Parlin's body. She began to gasp, hand at her chest. Only then did she notice the bodies on the walls.

Not game animals. What she had mistaken for a pheasant in the dim light of her lantern now reflected back green. A dead parrot. A monkey hung beside, body sliced and cut. The freshest corpse was that of a large lizard. All had been tortured.

"Oh, Austre," she mumbled.

Tonk Fah stepped forward, grabbing for her, and Vivenna finally shocked herself into motion. She ducked to the side, escaping his reach. She ran around the large man, scrambling toward the stairs. She came up short as she collided with someone's chest.

She looked up, blinking.

"Do you know what I hate most about being a mercenary, Princess?" Denth asked quietly, grabbing her arm. "Fulfilling the stereotypes. Everyone assumes that they can't trust you. The thing is, they really can't."

"We do what we're paid to," Tonk Fah said, stepping up behind her.

"It's not exactly the most desirable work," Denth said, holding her tightly. "But the money is good. I was hoping we wouldn't have to do this. Everything was going so nicely. Why did you run away? What tipped you off?"

He pushed her forward with a careful hand, still holding her arm, as Jewels and Clod moved down the steps behind him. The stairs groaned beneath the weight.

"You've been lying to me the entire time," she whispered, tears almost unnoticed on her cheeks, heart thumping as she tried to make sense of the world. "Why?"

"Kidnapping is hard work," Denth said.

"Terrible business," Tonk Fah added.

"It's better if your subject never even knows they've been kidnapped."

They always kept an eye on me. Staying near. "Lemex . . ."

"Didn't do what we needed him to," Denth said. "Poison was too good a death for that one. You should have known, Princess. With as much Breath as he held . . ."

He couldn't have died from sickness, she realized. *Austre!* Her mind was numb. She glanced at Parlin. *He's dead. Parlin is dead. They killed him.*

"Don't look at him," Denth said, delicately turning her head away from the corpse. "That was an accident. Listen to me, Princess. You'll be all right. We

won't hurt you. Just tell me why you ran away. Parlin insisted not to know where you had gone, though we knew he spoke to you on the stairs right before you vanished. Did you really leave without telling him? Why? What made you suspect us? Did one of your father's agents contact you? I thought we found all of those when they entered the city."

She shook her head dumbly.

"This is important, Princess," Denth said calmly. "I need to know. Whom did you contact? What did you tell the slumlords about me?" He began to squeeze her arm tightly.

"We wouldn't want to have to break anything," Tonk Fah said. "You Idrians. You break too easily."

What had once seemed lighthearted banter to her now seemed terrible and callous. Tonk Fah loomed in the shadowy lantern light to her right, Denth was a slimmer form in front of her. She remembered his speed, the way he'd slain those bodyguards at the restaurant.

Remembered the way they'd destroyed Lemex's house. Remembered their flippancy toward death. They'd hidden it all behind a veil of humor. Now that Denth had brought another lantern, she could see a couple of large sacks stuffed underneath the stairs; a foot was hanging out of one of them. The boot bore the crest of the Idrian army on its side.

Her father *had* sent people to recover her. Denth had just found them before they found her. How many had he killed? Bodies wouldn't keep for long in this basement. Those two corpses must be relatively new, awaiting disposal somewhere else.

"Why?" she asked again, nearly too stunned to speak. "You seemed like my friends."

"We are," Denth said. "I like you, Princess." He smiled—a genuine smile, not a dangerous leer, like Tonk Fah. "If it means anything, I really am sorry. Parlin wasn't supposed to die—that *was* an accident. But, well, a job is a job. We do what we're paid to do. I explained this all to you several times, I'm sure you recall."

"I never really believed . . ." she whispered.

"They never do," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna blinked. *Get away quickly. While you still have strength.*

She'd escaped once. Wasn't that enough? Didn't she deserve some peace?

Quickly!

She twisted her arm, slapping it against the back of Tonk Fah's cloak. "Grab—"

Denth, however, was too fast. He yanked her back, covered her mouth, then snatched her other hand, holding it tightly. Tonk Fah stood surprised as Vivenna's dress bled free of color, turning grey, and some of her Breath passed through Denth's fingers and into Tonk Fah's cloak. Yet without a Command, that Breath couldn't do anything. It had been wasted, and Vivenna felt the world around her grow more dull.

Denth released her mouth and slapped Tonk Fah on the back of the head.

"Hey," Tonk Fah said, rubbing his head.

"Pay attention," Denth said. Then he glanced at Vivenna, holding her arm tightly.

Blood seeped between his fingers from her wounded wrist. Denth froze, obviously seeing her bloodied wrists for the first time; the dark cellar had obscured them. He looked up, meeting her eyes. "Aw, hell," he cursed. "You didn't run from us, did you?"

"Huh?" Tonk Fah asked.

Vivenna was numb.

"What happened?" Denth asked. "Was it *him*?"

She didn't respond.

Denth grimaced, then twisted her arm, causing her to yelp. "All right. It looks like my hand has been forced. Let's deal with that Breath of yours first, and then we can have a chat—nicely, like friends—about what has happened to you."

Clod stepped up beside Denth, grey eyes staring forward, empty as always. Except . . . could she see something in them? Was she imagining it? Her emotions were so strained lately that she really couldn't trust her perceptions. Clod seemed to meet her eyes.

"Now," Denth said, face growing harder. "Repeat after me. My Life to yours. My Breath become yours."

Vivenna looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "Howl of the sun," she whispered.

Denth frowned. "What?"

"Attack Denth. Howl of the sun."

"I—" Denth began. At that moment, Clod's fist hit his face.

The blow threw Denth to the side and into Tonk Fah, who cursed and

stumbled. Vivenna wrenched free, ducking past Clod—nearly tripping on her dress—and threw her shoulder into the surprised Jewels.

Jewels fell. Vivenna scrambled up the stairs.

"You let her hear the security phrase?" Denth bellowed, sounds of struggle coming from where he was wrestling with Clod.

Jewels gained her feet and followed Vivenna. The woman's foot broke through a step, however. Vivenna stumbled into the room above, then threw the door shut. She reached over, turning the latch.

Won't hold them for long, she thought, feeling helpless. *They'll keep coming. Chasing me. Just like Vasher. God of Colors. What am I going to do?*

She rushed out onto the street, now lit by the dawn light filling into the city, and ducked down an alleyway. Then she just kept running—this time trying to pick the smallest, dirtiest, darkest alleyways she could.

36

I will not leave you, Susebron wrote, sitting on the floor beside the bed, his back propped up by pillows. *I promise.*

"How can you be sure?" Siri asked from her place on the bed. "Maybe once you have an heir, you'll grow tired of life, then give away your Breath."

First of all, he wrote, *I'm still not even sure how I would get an heir. You refuse to explain it to me, nor will you answer my questions.*

"They're embarrassing!" Siri said, feeling her short hair grow red. She turned it back to yellow in an instant.

Secondly, he wrote, *I cannot give away my Breath, not if what I understand about BioChroma is true. Do you think I've been lied to about how Breath works?*

He's getting much more articulate in his writing, Siri thought as she watched him erase. *It's such a shame that he's been locked up his entire life.*

"I really don't know that much about it," she said. "BioChroma isn't exactly something we focus on in Idris. I suspect that half of the things I know are rumors and exaggerations. For instance, back in Idris, they think you sacrifice people on altars in the court here—I heard that a dozen times from different people."

He paused, then continued writing. *Regardless, we argue something that is absurd. I will not change. I am not going to suddenly decide to kill myself. You do not need to worry.*

She sighed.

Siri, he wrote, *I lived for fifty years with no information, no knowledge,*

barely able to communicate. Can you really think that I would kill myself now? Now, when I've discovered how to write? When I've discovered someone to talk to? When I've discovered you?

She smiled. "All right. I believe you. But I still think we have to worry about your priests."

He didn't respond, looking away.

Why is he so cursedly loyal to them? she thought.

Finally, he looked back at her. *Would you grow your hair?*

She raised an eyebrow. "And what color am I to make it?"

Red, he wrote.

"You Hallandren and your bright colors," she said, shaking her head. "Do you realize that my people considered red the most flagrant of all colors?"

He paused. *I'm sorry,* he wrote. *I did not mean to offend you. I—*

He broke off as she reached down and touched his arm. "No," she said. "Look, I wasn't arguing. I was just being flirtatious. I'm sorry."

Flirtatious? he wrote. *My storybook doesn't use this term.*

"I know," Siri said. "That book is too full of stories about children getting eaten by trees and things."

The stories are metaphors meant to teach—

"Yes, I know," she said, interrupting him again.

So, what is flirtatious?

"It's . . ." *Colors! How do I get myself into these situations?* "It's when a girl acts hesitant—or sometimes silly—in order to make a man pay more attention to her."

Why would that make a man pay attention to her?

"Well, like this." She looked at him, leaning forward a bit. "Do you want me to grow my hair?"

Yes.

"Do you *really* want me to?"

Of course.

"Well then, if I must," she said, tossing her head and commanding her hair become a deep auburn red. It flushed midtoss, flaring from yellow to red like ink bleeding into a pool of clear water. Then she made it grow. The ability was more instinctive than conscious—like flexing a muscle. In this case, it was a "muscle" she'd been using a lot lately, since she tended to cut her hair off in the evenings rather than spending the time combing it.

Even as the hair whipped past her face, it grew in length. She tossed her head, one final time—the hair making it feel more heavy, her neck warm from the locks that now tumbled down around her shoulders and down her back, twisting in loose curls.

Susebron looked at her with wide eyes. She met them, then tried a seductive glance. The result seemed so ridiculous to her, however, that she just found herself laughing. She fell back on the bed, newly grown hair flaring around her.

Susebron tapped her leg. She looked over at him, and he stood up, sitting on the side of the bed so that she could see his tablet as he wrote.

You are very strange, he said.

She smiled. "I know. I'm not meant to be a seductress. I can't keep a straight face."

Seductress, he wrote. *I know that word. It is used in a story when the evil queen tries to tempt the young prince with something, though I don't know what.*

She smiled.

I think she must have been planning to offer him food.

"Yeah," Siri said. "Good interpretation, there, Seb. Completely right."

He hesitated. *She wasn't offering food, was she?*

Siri smiled again.

He flushed. *I feel like such an idiot. There is so much that everyone else understands intrinsically. Yet I have only the stories of a children's book to guide me. I've read them so often that it's hard to separate myself—and the way I view them—from the child I was when I first read them.*

He began to erase furiously. She sat up then laid a hand on his arm.

I know that there are things I'm missing, he wrote. *Things that embarrass you, and I have guesses. I am not a fool. And yet, I get frustrated. With your flirtation and sarcasm—both behaviors where you apparently act opposite to what you want—I fear that I will never understand you.*

He stared with frustration at his board, wiping cloth held in one hand, charcoal in the other. The fire cracked quietly in the fireplace, throwing waves of overbright yellow against his clean-shaven face.

"I'm sorry," she said, scooting closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his elbow, laying her head against his upper arm. He actually didn't seem that much bigger than she, now that she was used to it. There had

been men back in Idris who had stood as much as six and a half feet tall, and Susebron was only a few inches taller than that. Plus, because his body was so perfectly proportioned, he didn't seem spindly or unnatural. He was normal, just bigger.

He glanced at her as she rested her head on his arm and closed her eyes. "I think you are doing better than you think. Most people back in my homeland didn't understand me half as well as you do."

He began to write, and she opened her eyes.

I find that hard to believe.

"It's true," she said. "They kept telling me to become someone else."

Who?

"My sister," she said with a sigh. "The woman you were supposed to marry. She was everything the daughter of a king should be. Controlled, soft-spoken, obedient, learned."

She sounds boring, he wrote, smiling.

"Vivenna is a wonderful person," Siri said. "She was always very kind to me. It's just that . . . well, I think even she felt that I should have been more reserved."

I can't understand that, he wrote. *You're wonderful. So full of life and excitement. The priests and servants of the palace, they wear colors, but there's no color inside of them. They just go about their duties, eyes down, solemn. You've got color on the inside, so much of it that it bursts out and colors everything around you.*

She smiled. "That sounds like BioChroma."

You are more honest than BioChroma, he wrote. *My Breath, it makes things more bright, but it isn't mine. It was given to me. Yours is your own.*

She felt her hair shift from the deep red into a golden tone, and she sighed softly with contentment, pulling herself a little closer to him.

How do you do that? he wrote.

"Do what?"

Change your hair.

"That one was unconscious," she said. "It goes blond if I feel happy or content."

You're happy, then? he wrote. *With me?*

"Of course."

But when you speak of the mountains, there is such longing in your voice.

"I miss them," she said. "But if I left here, I'd miss you too. Sometimes, you can't have everything you want, since the wants contradict each other."

They fell silent for a time, and he set aside his board, hesitantly wrapping his arm around her and leaning back against the headboard. A blushful tinge of red crept into her hair as she realized that they were still sitting on the bed, and she was snuggling up beside him wearing only her shift.

But, well, she thought, *we* are *married, after all.*

The only thing that spoiled the moment was the occasional rumbling of her stomach. After a few minutes, Susebron reached for his board.

You are hungry? he wrote.

"No," she said. "My stomach is an anarchist; it likes to growl when it's full."

He paused. *Sarcasm?*

"A poor attempt," she said. "It's all right—I'll survive."

Didn't you eat before you came to my chambers?

"I did," she said. "But growing that much hair is draining. It always leaves me hungry."

It makes you hungry every night? he asked, writing quickly. *And you didn't say anything?*

She shrugged.

I will get you food.

"No, we can't afford to expose ourselves."

Expose what? he wrote. *I am God King—I have food whenever I wish it. I have sent for it at night before. This will not be odd.* He stood, walking toward the doorway.

"Wait!" she said.

He turned, glancing back at him.

"You can't go to the door like that, Susebron," she said, keeping her voice quiet, in case someone was listening. "You're still fully dressed."

He looked down, then frowned.

"Make your clothing look disheveled at least," she said, quickly hiding his writing board.

He undid his neck buttons, then threw off his deep black overrobe, revealing an undergown. Like everything white near him, it gave off a halo of rainbow colors. He reached up, mussing his dark hair. He turned back to her, eyes questioning.

"Good enough," she said, pulling the bedsheets up to her neck, covering

herself. She watched curiously as Susebron rapped on the door with his knuckles.

It immediately opened. *He's too important to open his own door,* Siri thought.

He commanded food by putting a hand to his stomach, then pointing away. The servants—barely visible to Siri through the doorway—scuttled away at his order. He turned as the door closed, walking back to sit beside her on the bed.

A few minutes later, servants arrived at the room with a dining table and a chair. They set the table with large amounts of food—everything from roasted fish to pickled vegetables and simmering shellfish.

Siri watched with amazement. *There's no way they fixed it that quickly. They simply had it waiting in the kitchens, should their god happen to grow hungry.*

It was wasteful to the point of extravagance, but it was also wondrous. It bespoke a lifestyle that her people back in Idris couldn't even imagine, one representative of an uncomfortable imbalance in the world. Some people starved; others were so wealthy that they never even *saw* most meals that were made for them.

The servants set only one chair at the table. Siri watched as they brought in plate after plate. They couldn't know what the God King wanted, so they apparently brought him some of everything. They filled the table, then retreated as Susebron pointed for them to go.

The scents were almost too much for Siri in her hungered state. She waited, tense, until the door closed. Then she threw off the sheets and rushed over. She had thought the meals prepared for her were extravagant, but they were nothing compared with this feast. Susebron gestured toward the chair.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked.

He shrugged.

She walked over and took one of the blankets from the bed, then spread it on the stone floor. "What looks good to you?" she said, approaching the table.

He pointed at the plate of simmering mussels and several of the breads. She moved these, along with a dish that didn't appear to have any fish in it—a bowl of exotic fruits tossed in some kind of creamy sauce—to the cloth. She then sat down and began eating.

Susebron carefully situated himself on the floor. He managed to look dig-

nified even when wearing only his undergown. Siri reached over and handed him his board.

This is very odd, he said.

"What?" she asked. "Eating on the floor?"

He nodded. *Dining is such a production for me. I eat some of what is on a plate, then servants pull it away, wipe my face, and bring me another one. I never finish an entire dish, even if I like it.*

Siri snorted. "I'm surprised they don't hold the spoon for you."

They did when I was younger, Susebron wrote, flushing. *I eventually got them to let me do it myself. It's hard, when you can't speak with anyone.*

"I can imagine," Siri said between mouthfuls. She eyed Susebron, who ate with small, reserved bites. She felt a slight stab of shame at how fast she was eating, then decided she didn't care. She put aside the fruit dish and fetched several pastries from the table.

Susebron eyed her as she began to eat one after another. *Those are Pahn Kahl tinkfans,* he wrote. *One takes only small bites, making sure to eat a piece of bread between to clear away the taste. They are a delicacy and—*

He broke off as Siri picked up an entire pastry and shoved it into her mouth. She smiled at him, then continued chewing.

After a moment of looking stunned, he wrote on his board again. *You realize that children in the stories who gorged themselves usually ended up being thrown off of cliffs?*

Siri stuffed another crispbread into her mouth beside the first, dusting her fingers and face with powdered sugar in the process, her cheeks bulging.

Susebron watched her, then reached over and took a whole one himself. He inspected it, then shoved it into his mouth.

Siri laughed, nearly spitting out bits of pastry onto the blanket. "And so my corruption of the God King continues," she said once she could speak.

He smiled. *This is very curious,* he wrote, eating another crispbread. Then another. Then another.

Siri watched him, raising an eyebrow. "One would think that as God King, you would *at least* be able to eat sweets whenever you want."

I have many rules that others need not follow, he wrote as he chewed. *The stories explained this. Much is required of a prince or a king. I would rather have been born a peasant.*

Siri raised an eyebrow. She had a feeling that he'd be surprised if he actually had to experience things like hunger, poverty, or even discomfort. However, she left him his illusions. Who was she to chastise?

You are the one who was hungry, he wrote. *But I am the one doing all the eating!*

"They obviously don't feed you enough," Siri said, trying a slice of bread.

He shrugged, continuing to eat. She watched him, wondering if eating was different for him, with no tongue. Did that affect his ability to taste? He certainly still seemed to like the sweets. Thinking of her tongue made her mind turn to darker topics. *We can't just keep going on like this,* she thought. *Playing around at night, pretending like the world isn't going on without us. We're going to get crushed.*

"Susebron," she said. "I think we need to find a way to expose what your priests have been doing to you."

He looked up, then wrote, *What do you mean?*

"I mean that we should have you try to talk to the common people," she said. "Or maybe some of the other gods. The priests gain all of their power by associating with you. If you choose to communicate through someone else, it would overthrow them."

Do we need to do that?

"Pretend with me for a moment that we do," she said.

Very well, he wrote. *But how, exactly, would I communicate with someone else? I can't exactly stand up and begin shouting.*

"I don't know. Notes, perhaps?"

He smiled. *There is a story about that in my book. A princess trapped in a tower who throws notes out into the ocean waters. The king of the fishes finds them.*

"I doubt the king of fishes cares about our predicament," Siri said flatly.

Such a creature is only slightly less fantastic than the possibility of my notes being found and interpreted correctly. If I threw them out the window, nobody would believe that the God King had written them.

"And if you passed them to servants?"

He frowned. *Assuming that you are right, and that my priests are working against me, then wouldn't it be foolhardy to trust the servants they employ?*

"Perhaps. We could try a Pahn Kahl servant."

None of them attend me, for I am the God King, he wrote. *Besides, what if we did get a servant or two on our side? How would that expose the priests? Nobody would believe a Pahn Kahl servant who contradicted the priests.*

She shook her head. "I suppose you could try making a scene, running away or causing a distraction."

When outside of the palace, I am constantly attended by a troop of hundreds. Awakeners, soldiers, guards, priests, and Lifeless warriors. Do you honestly think I could make any kind of a scene without being rushed away before I could communicate with anyone?

"No," she admitted. "But we have to do something! There has to be a way out of this."

I do not see one. We need to work with the priests, not against them. Perhaps they know more about why the God Kings die. They could tell us—I can speak to them, using the artisans' script.

"No," Siri said. "Not yet. Let me think first."

Very well, he wrote, then tried another pastry.

"Susebron . . ." she finally said. "Would you consider running away with me? Back to Idris?"

He frowned. *Perhaps,* he finally wrote. *That seems extreme.*

"What if I could prove that the priests are trying to kill you? And what if I could provide a way out—someone to smuggle us from the palace and out of the city?"

The concept obviously bothered him. *If it is the only way,* he wrote, *then I will go with you. But I do not believe that we will get to that point.*

"I hope you're right," she said. *But if you're not,* she thought, *then we're escaping. We'll take our chances back with my family, war or no war.*

37

In the slums it could seem like night, even during the full light of day.

Vivenna wandered, aimless, stepping over soiled bits of colorful trash. She knew that she should find a place to hide and stay there. Yet she wasn't really thinking straight anymore.

Parlin was dead. He'd been her friend since childhood. She'd convinced him to come with her on what now seemed the most idiotic of quests. His death was her fault.

Denth and his team had betrayed her. No. They had *never* worked for her. Now that she looked back, she could see the signs. How conveniently they'd found her in the restaurant. How they'd used her to get at Lemex's Breath. How they'd manipulated her, letting her feel that she was in control. They'd just been playing along.

She'd been a prisoner and never known it.

The betrayal felt so much the worse for how she'd come to trust, even befriend, them. She should have seen the warnings. Tonk Fah's joking brutality. Denth's explanations that mercenaries had no allegiances. He'd pointed out that Jewels would work against her own gods. Compared with that, what was betraying a friend?

She stumbled down yet another alleyway, hand on the wall of a brick building beside her. Dirt and soot stained her fingers. Her hair was a bleached white. It still hadn't recovered.

The attack in the slum had been frightening. Getting captured by Vasher

had been terrifying. But seeing Parlin, tied to that chair, blood coming from his nose, his cheeks sliced open to reveal the inside of his mouth . . .

She would never forget. Something inside of her seemed broken. Her ability to care. She was just . . . numb.

She reached the end of the alleyway, then looked up dully. There was a wall front of her. A dead end. She turned to go back.

"You," a voice said.

Vivenna turned, surprised at the speed her own reaction. Her mind remained shocked, but a carnal part of her was still awake. Capable of defensive instinct.

She stood in a narrow alley like those she had walked down all day. She'd kept to the slums, figuring that Denth would expect her to run for the open city. He knew it better than she did. In her addled mind, staying in the cluttered, quiet slum seemed a much better idea.

A man sat on a small stack of boxes behind her, legs swinging over the sides. He was short, dark-haired, and wore typical slum clothing—a mixture of garments going through various stages of wear.

"You've been causing quite a stir," the man said.

She stood quietly.

"Woman wandering the slums in a beautiful white dress, eyes dark, hair white and ragged. If everyone hadn't been so paranoid following the raid the other day, you'd have been seen to hours ago."

The man seemed faintly familiar. "You're Idrian," she whispered. "You were there, in the crowd, when I visited the slumlords."

He shrugged.

"That means you know who I am," she said.

"I don't know anything," he said. "Particularly not things that could get me into trouble."

"Please," she said. "You have to help me." She took a step forward.

He hopped off his boxes, a knife flashing in his hand. "Help you?" he asked. "I saw that look in your eyes when you came to the meeting. You look down on us. Just like the Hallandren."

She shied back.

"A lot of people have seen you wandering about like a wraith," he said. "But nobody seems to know exactly where to find you. There's quite a search going in some parts."

Denth, she thought. *It's a miracle I've stayed free so long. I need to do something. Stop wandering. Find a place to hide.*

"I figure that someone will find you eventually," the man said. "So I'm going to act first."

"Please," she whispered.

He raised the knife. "I won't turn you in. You deserve at least that much. Besides, I don't want to draw attention to myself. That dress, though. That will sell for a lot, even damaged like it is. I could feed my family for weeks on that cloth."

She hesitated.

"Scream and I'll cut you," he said quietly. "It's not a threat. It's just an inevitability. The dress, Princess. You'll be better without it. It's what is making everyone take notice of you."

She considered using her Breath. But what if it didn't work? She couldn't concentrate, and had a feeling that she wouldn't be able to get the Commands to work. She wavered, but the looming knife convinced her. So, staring straight ahead and feeling like she was someone else, she reached up and began undoing the buttons.

"Don't drop it to the ground," the man said. "It's dirty enough already."

She pulled it off, then shivered, standing only in her underleggings and her shift. He took the dress, then opened her pocket pouch. He frowned as he tossed aside the rope inside of it. "No money?"

She shook her head dully.

"The leggings. They're silk, right?"

Her shift came down to her midthighs. She stooped down, pulling off the leggings, then handed them over. He took them, and she saw a glint of greed—or perhaps something else—in his eyes.

"The shift," he said, waving his knife.

"No," she said quietly.

He took a step forward.

Something snapped inside of her.

"No!" she yelled. "No, no, NO! You take your city, your colors and clothing, and go! Leave me!" She fell to her knees, crying, and grabbed handfuls of refuse and mud, rubbing it on the shift. "There!" she screamed. "You want it! Take it from me! Sell it like this!"

Contrary to his threat, the man wavered. He looked around, then clutched the valuable cloth to his chest and dashed away.

Vivenna knelt. Where had she found more tears? She curled up, heedless of the trash and mud, and wept.

IT STARTED RAINING sometime while she was curled in the mud. It was one of the soft, hazy Hallandren rainfalls. The wet drops kissed her cheek; little streams ran down the sides of the alleyway walls.

She was hungry and exhausted. But with the falling rain came a shred of lucidity.

She needed to move. The thief had been right—the dress had been a hindrance. She felt naked in the shift, particularly now that it was wet, but she had seen women in the slums wearing just as little. She needed to go on, become just another waif in the dirt and grime.

She crawled over to a refuse pile, noticing a bit of a cloth sticking from it. She pulled free a muddy, stinking shawl. Or maybe it had been a rug. Either way, she wrapped it around her shoulders, pulling it tight across her chest to offer some measure of modesty. She tried to make her hair black, but it refused.

She sat down, too apathetic to be frustrated. Instead, she simply rubbed mud and dirt into her hair, changing the pale white into a sickly brown.

It's still too long, she thought. *I'll need to do something about that. It stands out. No beggar would keep hair that long—it would be difficult to care for.*

She began to make her way out of the alleyway, then paused. The shawl had become brighter, now that she was wearing it. *Breath. I'll be immediately visible to anyone with the First Heightening. I can't hide in the slums!*

She still felt the loss of the Breath she'd sent into the rope and then the larger amount she'd wasted on Tonk's cloak. Yet she had the greater portion left. She huddled down by the side of the wall, nearly losing control again as she considered the situation.

And then she realized something.

Tonk Fah snuck up on me down in that cellar. I couldn't feel his Breath. Just like I couldn't feel Vasher's when he ambushed me in my rooms.

The answer felt so easy it was ridiculous. She couldn't feel the Breath in the

rope she'd made. She picked it up, tying it around her ankle. Then she took the shawl, holding it in front of her. It was such a pathetic thing, frayed at the edges, its original red color barely peeking through the grime.

"My life to yours," she said, speaking the words Denth had tried to get her to say. "My Breath become yours." They were the same words Lemex had spoken when he'd given her his Breath.

It worked on the shawl too. Her Breath drained from her body, all of it, invested into the shawl. It was no Command—the shawl wouldn't be able do anything—but her Breath, hopefully, would be safe. She wouldn't give off an aura.

None at all. She almost fell to the ground with the shock of losing it all. Where she had once been able to sense the city around her, now everything became still. It was as if it had been silenced. The entire city becoming dead.

Or maybe it was Vivenna who had become dead. A Drab. She stood slowly, shivering in the drizzling rain, and wiped the water from her eyes. Then she pulled the shawl—Breaths and all—close and shuffled away.

38

Lightsong sat on the edge of his bed, sweat thick on his brow as he stared down at the floor in front of him. He was breathing heavily.

Llarimar eyed a lesser scribe, who lowered his pen. Servants clustered around the edges of the bedchamber. They had, at his request, woken him up unusually early in the morning.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked.

It's nothing, Lightsong thought. *I dream of war because I'm thinking about it. Not because of prophecy. Not because I'm a god.*

It felt so real. In the dream he had been a man, on the battlefield, with no weapon. Soldiers had died around him. Friend after friend. He had known them, each one close to him.

A war against Idris wouldn't be like that, he thought. *It would be fought by our Lifeless.*

He didn't want to acknowledge that his friends during the dream hadn't been wearing bright colors. He hadn't been seeing through the eyes of a Hallandren soldier, but an Idrian. Perhaps that was why it had been such a slaughter.

The Idrians are the ones threatening us. They're the rebels who broke off, maintaining a second throne inside of Hallandren borders. They need to be quelled.

They deserve it.

"What did you see, Your Grace?" Llarimar asked again.

Lightsong closed his eyes. There were other images. The recurring ones.

The glowing red panther. The tempest. A young woman's face, being absorbed by darkness. Eaten alive.

"I saw Blushweaver," he said, speaking only of the very last part of the dreams. "Her face red and flushed. I saw you, and you were sleeping. And I saw the God King."

"The God King?" Llarimar asked, sounding excited.

Lightsong nodded. "He was crying."

The scribe wrote the images down. Llarimar, for once, didn't prompt further. Lightsong stood, forcing the images out of his mind. Yet he couldn't ignore that his body felt weak. It was his feast day, and he would have to take in a Breath or he would die.

"I'm going to need some urns," Lightsong said. "Two dozen of them, one for each of the gods, painted after their colors."

Llarimar gave the order without even asking why.

"I'll also need some pebbles," Lightsong said as the servants dressed him. "Lots of them."

Llarimar nodded. Once Lightsong was dressed, he turned to leave the room. Off once again to feed on the soul of a child.

Lightsong threw a pebble into one of the urns in front of him. It made a slight ringing sound.

"Well done, Your Grace," Llarimar complimented him, standing beside Lightsong's chair.

"Nothing to it," Lightsong said, tossing another pebble. It fell short of the intended urn, and a servant rushed forward, plucking it off the ground and depositing it in the proper container.

"I appear to be a natural," Lightsong noted. "I get it in every time." He felt much better, having been given fresh Breath.

"Indeed, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "I believe that Her Grace the goddess Blushweaver is approaching."

"Good," Lightsong said, throwing another pebble. He hit the target this time. Of course, the urns were only a few feet from his seat. "I can show off my pebble-throwing skills."

He sat on the green of the courtyard, a cool breeze blowing, his pavilion

set up just inside the court's gates. He could see the blocking wall, the one that kept him from looking out at the city proper. With the wall in the way, it was a rather depressing sight.

If they're going to lock us in here, he thought, *they could at least give us the courtesy of a decent view out.*

"What in the name of the Iridescent Tones are you doing?"

Lightsong didn't need to look to know that Blushweaver was standing with hands on hips beside him. He threw another pebble.

"You know," he said, "it's always struck me as strange. When we say oaths like that, we use the colors. Why not use our own names? We are, allegedly, gods."

"Most gods don't like their names being used as an oath," Blushweaver said, sitting beside him.

"Then they are far too pompous for my taste," Lightsong said, tossing a pebble. It missed, and a servant deposited it. "I, personally, should find it very flattering to have my name used as an oath. Lightsong the Brave! Or, by Lightsong the Bold! I suppose that's a bit of a mouthful. Perhaps we could shorten it to simple Lightsong!"

"I swear," she said. "You are getting stranger by the day."

"No, actually," he said. "You *didn't* swear in that particular statement. Unless you're proposing we should swear using the personal pronoun. *You!* So, your line at this point is 'What in the name of You are you doing?' "

She grumbled at him under her breath.

He eyed her. "I certainly don't deserve that yet. I've barely gotten started. Something else must be bothering you."

"Allmother," she said.

"Still won't give you the Commands?"

"Refuses to even speak with me now."

Lightsong threw a pebble into one of the urns. "Ah, if only she knew the refreshing sense of frustration she was missing out on knowing by refusing your acquaintance."

"I'm not that frustrating!" Blushweaver said. "I've actually been rather charming with her."

"Then that is your problem, I surmise," Lightsong said. "We're gods, my dear, and we quickly grow tired of our immortal existences. Surely we seek for extreme ranges in emotion—good or bad, it doesn't matter. In a way, it's

the *absolute value* of emotion that is important, rather than the positive or negative nature of that emotion."

Blushweaver paused. So did Lightsong.

"Lightsong, dear," she said. "What in the name of You did that mean?"

"I'm not exactly sure," he said. "It just kind of came out. I can visualize what it means in my head, though. With numbers."

"Are you all right?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Images of warfare flashed in his mind. His best friend, a man he didn't know, dying with a sword through the chest. "I'm not sure," he said. "Things have been rather strange for me lately."

She sat quietly for a moment. "You want to go back to my palace and frolic? That always makes me feel better."

He tossed a pebble, smiling. "You, my dear, are incorrigible."

"I'm the goddess of lust, for Your sake," she said. "I've got to fill the role."

"Last I checked," he said, "you were goddess of honesty."

"Honesty and honest emotions, my dear," she said sweetly. "And let me tell you, lust is one of the most honest of all emotions. Now, what *are* you doing with those silly pebbles?"

"Counting," he said.

"Counting your inanities?"

"That," Lightsong said, tossing another pebble, "and counting the number of priests who come through the gates wearing the colors of each god or goddess."

Blushweaver frowned. It was midday, and the gates were fairly busy with the comings and goings of servants and performers. There were only occasionally priests or priestesses, however, since they would have been required to come in early to attend their gods.

"Each time a priest of a particular god enters," Lightsong said, "I toss a pebble into the urn representing that god."

Blushweaver watched him toss—and miss—with another pebble. As he'd instructed, the servants picked the pebble up and put it in the proper urn. Violet and silver. To the side, one of Hopefinder's priestesses rushed across the green toward her god's palace.

"I'm baffled," Blushweaver finally said.

"It's easy," Lightsong said. "You see someone wearing purple, you throw a pebble in the urn of the same color."

"Yes, dear," she said. "But *why*?"

"To keep track of how many priests of each god enter the court, of course," Lightsong said. "They've slowed to nearly a trickle. Scoot, would you mind counting?"

Llarimar bowed then gathered several servants and scribes, ordering them to empty the urns and count the contents of each one.

"My dear Lightsong," Blushweaver said. "I *do* apologize if I've been ignoring you lately. Allmother has been rudely unresponsive to my suggestions. If my lack of attention has caused your fragile mind to snap . . ."

"My mind is quite unsnapped, thank you," Lightsong said, sitting up, watching the servants count.

"Then, you must be so very bored," Blushweaver continued. "Perhaps we can come up with something to entertain you."

"I'm well entertained." He smiled even before the counting results were in. Mercystar had one of the smallest piles.

"Lightsong?" Blushweaver asked. Nearly all of her playful attitude was gone.

"I ordered my priests in early today," Lightsong said, glancing at her. "And to set up position here, in front of the gates, before the sun even rose. We've been counting priests for some six hours now."

Llarimar walked over, handing Lightsong a list of the gods and the number of priests who had entered wearing their colors. Lightsong scanned it, nodding to himself.

"Some of the gods have had over a hundred priests report for service, yet a couple of them have had barely a dozen. Mercystar is one of those."

"So?" Blushweaver asked.

"So," Lightsong said. "I'm going to send my servants to watch and count at Mercystar's palace, keeping track of the number of priests who are there. I already suspect that I know what they'll find. Mercystar doesn't have fewer priests than the rest of us. They're just getting into the court by a different route."

Blushweaver looked at him blankly, but then cocked her head. "The tunnels?"

Lightsong nodded.

Blushweaver leaned back, sighing. "Well at least you're not insane or bored. You're just obsessed."

"Something's going on with those tunnels, Blushweaver. And it relates to the servant who was murdered."

"Lightsong, we have *much* bigger problems to worry about!" Blushweaver shook her head, holding her forehead as if she could have a headache. "I can't believe that you're still bothering with this. Honestly! The kingdom is about to go to war—for the first time, your position in the assembly is important—and you're worrying about how priests are getting into the court?"

Lightsong didn't respond immediately. "Here," he finally said, "let me prove my point to you."

He reached over to the side of his couch and picked a small box up off the ground. He held it up, showing it to Blushweaver.

"A box," she said flatly. "What a convincing argument you make."

He pulled the top off of the box, leaving a small grey squirrel sitting in his hand. It stood perfectly still, staring forward, fur blowing in the breeze.

"A Lifeless rodent," Blushweaver said. "That's *much* better. I feel myself being swayed already."

"The person who broke into Mercystar's palace used this as a distraction," Lightsong said. "Do you know anything about breaking Lifeless, my dear?"

She shrugged.

"I didn't either," Lightsong said. "Not until I required my priests to break this one. Apparently, it requires *weeks* to take control of a Lifeless for which you do not have the right security phrases. I'm not even sure how the process goes—has something to do with Breath and torture, apparently."

"Torture?" she said. "Lifeless can't feel."

Lightsong shrugged. "Anyway, my servants broke this one for me. The stronger and more skilled the Awakener who created the Lifeless, the more difficult it is to break it."

"That's why we need to get the Commands from Allmother," Blushweaver said. "If something were to happen to her, her ten thousand would become useless to us. It would take years to break that many Lifeless!"

"The God King and some of Allmother's priestesses have the codes as well," Lightsong said.

"Oh," Blushweaver said, "and you think *he* is going to just give them over to us? Assuming we're even allowed to talk to him?"

"I'm just pointing out that a single assassination couldn't ruin our entire army," Lightsong said, holding up the squirrel. "That's not the point. The

point is that whomever made this squirrel held quite a bit of Breath and knew what he was doing. The creature's blood has been replaced with ichor-alcohol. The sutures are perfect. The Commands controlling the rodent were extremely strong. It's a marvelous piece of BioChromatic art."

"And?" she asked.

"And he released it in Mercystar's palace," Lightsong said. "Creating a distraction so that he could sneak into those tunnels. Someone else followed the intruder, and this second person killed a man to keep him from revealing what he'd seen. Whatever is in those tunnels—wherever they lead—it's important enough to waste Breath on. Important enough to kill for."

Blushweaver shook her head. "I still can't believe you are even worrying about this."

"You said you knew about the tunnels," Lightsong said. "I had Llarimar ask around, and others know of them too. They're used for storage beneath the palaces, as said. Different gods have ordered them constructed at various times during the history of the court.

"But," he continued, excited, "they would also be the perfect place to set up a clandestine operation! The court is outside the jurisdiction of the regular city guards. Each palace is like a little, autonomous country! Expand a few of those cellars so that their tunnels connect with others, dig them out past the walls so that you can come and go secretly . . ."

"Lightsong," Blushweaver said. "If something *that* secret were going on, then why would the priests use those tunnels to come into the court? Wouldn't that be a little suspicious? I mean, if you noticed it, how hard could it be to discover?"

Lightsong paused, then flushed slightly. "Of course," he said. "I got so wrapped up in pretending to be useful that I forgot myself! Thank you so much for reminding me that I am an idiot."

"Lightsong, I didn't mean—"

"No, it's quite all right," he said, standing. "Why bother? I need to remember who I am. Lightsong, self-hating god. The most useless person ever granted immortality. Just answer one question for me."

Blushweaver paused. "What question?"

"Why?" he asked, looking at her. "*Why* do I hate being a god? Why do I act so frivolous? Why do I undermine my own authority. Why?"

"I always assumed it was because you were amused by the contrast."

"No," he said. "Blushweaver, I was *like this from the first day.* When I awoke, I refused to believe I was a god. Refused to accept my place in this pantheon and this court. I've acted accordingly ever since. And, if I might say, I've gotten quite a bit more clever about it as the years have passed. Which is beside the point. The thing I must focus on—the important point here—is *why.*"

"I don't know," she confessed.

"I don't either," he said. "But whoever I was before, he's trying to get out. He keeps whispering for me to dig at this mystery. Keeps warning me that I'm no god. Keeps prompting me to deal with all this in a frivolous way." He shook his head. "I don't know who I was—nobody will tell me. But I'm beginning to have suspicions. I was a person who couldn't simply sit and let something unexplained slide away into the fog of memory. I was a man who hated secrets. And I'm only just beginning to understand how many secrets there are in this court."

Blushweaver looked taken aback.

"Now," he said, walking away from the pavilion, his servants hurrying to catch up, "if you will excuse me, I have some business to attend to."

"What business?" Blushweaver demanded, rising.

He glanced back. "To see Allmother. There are some Lifeless Commands that need to be dealt with."

39

A week living in the gutters served to drastically change Vivenna's perspective on life.

She sold her hair on the second day for a depressingly small amount of money. The food that she'd bought hadn't even filled her stomach, and she didn't have the strength to regrow the locks. The haircut didn't even have the dignity of being cleanly shorn—it was a ragged job of hackwork, and the remaining hair would have still been a pale white, save for the fact that it was matted and blackened with dirt and soot.

She'd thought about selling her Breath, but wouldn't even know where to go or how to go about it. Besides, she had a strong feeling that Denth would be watching places where she might sell the Breath. Beyond that, she had no idea how to get the Breaths back from her shawl, now that she'd put them into it.

No. She had to remain secret, unseen. Couldn't draw attention to herself.

She sat on the side of the street, holding out her hand to the passing crowds, keeping her eyes down. No offerings came. She wasn't certain how the other beggars did it; their meager earnings seemed an amazing treasure. They knew so much she didn't—where to sit, how to plead. Passers learned to avoid beggars, even with their eyes. The successful beggars, then, were those who managed to draw attention.

Vivenna wasn't certain if she wanted the attention or not. Though the gnawing pain of hunger had eventually driven her out onto busy streets, she was still frightened that Denth or Vasher might find her.

The more hungry she got, the less other worries bothered her. Eating was a problem for *now.* Being killed by Denth or Vasher was a problem for *later.*

The flood of people in their colors continued to pass. Vivenna watched them without focusing on faces or bodies. Just colors. Like a spinning wheel, each spoke a different hue. *Denth won't find me here,* she thought. *He won't see the princess in the beggar on the side of the street.*

Her stomach growled. She was learning to ignore it. Just as the people ignored her. She didn't feel like she was a true beggar or child of the street, not after just one week. But she *was* learning to imitate them, and her mind felt so fuzzy lately. Ever since she'd gotten rid of her Breath.

She pulled the shawl close. She kept it with her always.

She still hardly believed what Denth and the others had done. She had such fond memories of their joking. She couldn't connect that to what she'd seen in the cellar. In fact, sometimes she found herself rising to seek them out. Surely the things she'd seen had been hallucinations. Surely they couldn't be such terrible men.

That's foolish, she thought. *I need to focus. Why isn't my mind working right anymore?*

Focus on what? There wasn't much to think about. She couldn't go to Denth. Parlin was dead. The city authorities would be no help—she had now heard the rumors of the Idrian princess who had been causing such troubles. She'd be arrested in a heartbeat. If there were any more of her father's agents in the city, she had no idea how to locate them without exposing herself to Denth. Besides, there was a good chance that Denth had found those agents and killed them. He'd been so clever at keeping her captive, quietly eliminating those who could have taken her to safety. What did her father think? Vivenna lost to him, every man he sent to retrieve her vanishing mysteriously, Hallandren inching closer and closer to declaring war.

Those were distant worries. Her stomach growled. There were soup kitchens in the city, but at the first one she'd gone to, she'd spotted Tonk Fah lounging in a doorway across the street. She'd turned and scurried away, hoping he hadn't seen her. For the same reason, she didn't dare leave the city. Denth was sure to have agents watching the gates. Besides, where would she go? She didn't have the supplies for a trip back to Idris.

Perhaps she could leave if she managed to save up enough money. That

was hard, almost impossible. Every time she got a coin, she spent it on food. She couldn't help herself. Nothing else seemed to matter.

She'd already lost weight. Her stomach growled again.

So she sat, sweaty and filthy in the meager shade. She still wore only her shift and the shawl, though she was dirty enough that it was difficult to tell where clothing ended and skin began. Her former arrogant refusal to wear anything but the elegant dresses now seemed ridiculous.

She shook her head, trying to clear the fog from it. One week on the street felt like an eternity—yet she knew that she'd only just begun to experience the life of the poor. How did they survive, sleeping in alleyways, getting rained on every day, jumping at every sound, feeling so hungry they were tempted to pick at and eat the rotting garbage they found in gutters? She'd tried that. She'd even managed to keep some down.

It was the only thing she'd had to eat in two days.

Someone stopped beside her. She looked up, eager, hand stretching out further until she saw the colors he wore. Yellow and blue. City guard. She grabbed at her shawl, pulling it closer. It was foolish, she knew—nobody knew about the Breaths it contained. The move was reflexive. The shawl was the only thing she owned, and—meager though it was—several urchins had already tried to steal it from her while she slept.

The guard didn't reach for her shawl. He just nudged her with his truncheon. "Hey," he said. "Move. No begging on this corner."

He didn't explain. They never did. There were apparently rules about where beggars could sit and where they couldn't, but nobody bothered to provide the specifics to the beggars. Laws were things of lords and gods, not the lowly.

I'm already starting to think about lords as if they were some other species.

Vivenna rose and felt a moment of nausea and dizziness. She rested against the side of the building, and the guard nudged her again, prompting her to shuffle away.

She bowed her head and moved along with the crowd, though most of them kept their distance from her. Ironic that they would leave her space now that she didn't care. She didn't want to think about how she smelled—though more than the scent, it was the fear of being robbed that probably kept the others away. They needn't have worried. She wasn't skilled enough to cut purses or pick pockets, and she couldn't afford to get caught trying.

She'd stopped worrying about the morality of stealing days ago. Even before leaving the slum alleys for the streets, she hadn't been so naive as to believe that she wouldn't steal if she were denied food, though she had assumed that it would take her far longer to reach that state.

She didn't head to another corner, but instead shuffled out of the crowds, making her way back into the Idrian slums. Here she'd gained some small measure of acceptance. At least she was considered one of them. None knew that she was the princess—after that first man, nobody had recognized her. However, her accent had earned her a place.

She began to seek out a location to spend the night. That was one of the reasons she'd decided not to continue begging for the evening. It was a profitable time, true, but she was just so tired. She wanted a good place to sleep. She wouldn't have thought that it would make much difference which alleyway one huddled in, but some were warmer than others and some had better cover from the rain. Some were safer. She was beginning to learn these things, as well as who to avoid angering.

In her case, that last group included pretty much everyone—including the urchins. They were all above her in the pecking order. She'd learned that second day. She'd tried to bring back a coin from selling her hair, intending to save it for a chance at leaving the city. She wasn't certain how the urchins had known that she had coin, but she'd gotten her first beating that day.

Her favorite alleyway turned out to be occupied by a group of men with dark expressions, doing something that was obviously illegal. She left quickly, going to her second-favorite. It was crowded with a gang of urchins. The ones who had beaten her before. She left that one quickly as well.

The third alley was empty. This one was beside a building with a bakery. The ovens hadn't yet been stoked for the night's baking, but they would provide some warmth through the walls in the early morning.

She lay down, curling up with her back against the bricks, clutching her shawl close. Despite the lack of pillow or blanket, she was asleep in moments.

40

Siri was enjoying a meal on the court green when Treledees found her. She ignored him, content to pick at the dishes in front of her.

The sea, she had decided, was quite strange. What else could be said of a place that could spawn creatures with such wiggly tentacles and boneless bodies, and yet others with such needly skins? She poked at something the locals called a cucumber, but which—in actuality—tasted nothing like one.

She tried each dish, testing them with her eyes closed, focusing on the flavor. Some hadn't been as bad as the others. She hadn't really liked any of them. Seafood just wasn't appetizing to her.

I would have trouble becoming a true Hallandren, she decided, sipping her fruit juice.

Fortunately, the juice was delicious. The variety, and flavor, of the numerous Hallandren fruits was almost as remarkable as the oddity of its sea life.

Treledees cleared his throat. The God King's high priest was not one accustomed to waiting.

Siri nodded to her serving women, motioning for them to prepare another series of plates. Susebron had been coaching Siri on how to eat with etiquette, and she wanted to practice. Coincidentally, his way of eating—taking small bites, never really finishing anything—was a good one for testing out new dishes. She wanted to become familiar with Hallandren, its ways, its people, its tastes. She'd forced her servants to begin talking to her more, and she planned to meet with more of the gods. In the distance, she saw Lightsong

wandering by, and she waved to him fondly. He seemed uncharacteristically preoccupied; he waved back, but didn't come over to visit her.

Pity, she thought. *I would have liked a good excuse to keep Treledees waiting even longer.*

The high priest cleared his throat again, this time more demandingly. Finally, Siri stood, gesturing for her servants to stay behind.

"Would you mind walking with me for a bit, Your Excellency?" she asked lightly. She passed him, moving languidly in a gorgeous violet dress with a gossamer train that trailed through the grass behind her.

He hurried to catch up. "I need to speak to you about something."

"Yes," she said. "I deduced that by the way that you summoned me several times today."

"You didn't come," he said.

"It seems to me that the consort of the God King should not make a habit of responding to demands and hopping to attend upon others whenever she is requested."

Treledees frowned.

"However," she continued, "I will of course make time for the high priest himself, should he come to speak to me."

He eyed her, standing tall and straight-backed, wearing the God King's colors of the day—blue and copper. "You should not antagonize me, Your Highness."

Siri felt a brief flush off anxiety, but caught her hair before it bleached white. "I am not antagonizing you," she said. "I am simply establishing some rules that should have been understood from the beginning."

Treledees got a hint of a smile on his face.

What? Siri thought with surprise. *Why that reaction?*

As they walked, he drew himself up. "Is that so?" he said, his voice turning condescending. "You know very little of what you presume, Your Highness."

Blast! she thought. *How did this conversation get away from me so quickly?*

"I might say the same to you, Your Excellency." The massive black temple of a palace loomed above them, sheer ebony blocks stacked like the playthings of gigantic child.

"Oh?" he said, glancing at her. "Somehow I doubt that."

She had to force back another spear of anxiety. Treledees smiled again.

Wait, she thought. *It's like he can read my emotions. Like he can see . . .*

Her hair hadn't changed colors, at least not discernibly. She glanced at Treledees, trying to figure out what was wrong. She noticed something interesting. In a circle around Treledees, the grass seemed just a shade more colorful.

Breath, she thought. *Of course he'd have it! He's one of the most powerful men in the kingdom.*

People with lots of Breath were supposed to be able to see very minute changes in color. Could he really be reading her from such faint reactions in her hair? Was that why he had always been so dismissive? Could he see her fear?

She gritted her teeth. In her youth, Siri had ignored the exercises that Vivenna had done to make sure she had complete control over her hair. Siri was an emotional person, and people had been able to read her regardless her hair, so she'd figured that there was no point in learning to manipulate the Royal Locks.

She hadn't imagined a Court of Gods and men with the power of BioChroma. Those tutors had been a *whole* lot more intelligent than Siri had credited. As were the priests. Now that she thought about it, it was obvious that Treledees and the others would have studied the meanings of all the shades of hair changes.

She needed to get the conversation back on course. "Do not forget, Treledees," she said. "You are the one who came to see me. Obviously, I have *some* power here, if I could force even the high priest to do as I wish."

He glanced at her, eyes cold. Focusing, she kept her hair the deepest black. Black, for confidence. She met his eyes, and let not even a slight tinge color her locks.

He finally turned away. "I have heard disturbing rumors."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It appears that you are no longer fulfilling your wifely duties. Are you pregnant?"

"No," she said. "I had my women's issue just a couple of days ago. You can ask my servants."

"Then why have you stopped trying?"

"What?" she asked lightly. "Are your spies disappointed to be missing their nightly show?"

Treledees flushed just slightly. He glanced at her, and she still managed to

keep her hair perfectly black. Not even a glimmer of white or red. He seemed more uncertain.

"You Idrians," the priest spat. "Living up in your lofty mountains, dirty and uncultured, but still assuming that you're better than us. Don't judge me. Don't judge us. You know nothing."

"I know that you've been listening in on the God King's chamber."

"Not just listening," Treledees said. "The first few nights, there was a spy in the chambers itself."

Siri couldn't mask this blush. Her hair remained mostly black, but if Treledees really did have enough BioChroma to distinguish subtle changes, he would have seen a hint of red.

"I am well aware of the poisonous things your monks teach," Treledees said, turning away. "The hatred into which you're indoctrinated. Do you really think that we'd let a woman from Idris confront the God King himself, alone, unwatched? We had to make certain you weren't intending to kill him. We're still not convinced."

"You speak with remarkable frankness," she noted.

"Merely saying some things that *I* should have established from the beginning." They stopped in the shadow of the massive palace. "You are not important here. Not compared to our God King. He is everything, and you are *nothing.* Just like the rest of us."

If Susebron is so important, Siri thought, meeting Treledees's eyes, *then why are you planning to kill him?* She held his eyes. The woman she'd been a few months ago would have looked away. But when she felt weak, she remembered Susebron. Treledees was orchestrating the plot to subdue, control, and eventually kill his own God King.

And Siri wanted to know why.

"I stopped having sex with the God King on purpose," she said, keeping her hair dark with some effort. "I knew it would get your attention."

In truth, she had simply stopped her little performances each night. Treledees's reaction, fortunately, proved that the priests believed her acting. For that she blessed her luck. They might still be unaware that she could communicate with Susebron. She was extra careful to whisper at night, and had even taken to writing things herself, to keep up the charade.

"You must produce an heir," Treledees said.

"Or what? Why are you so eager, Treledees?"

"It is none of your concern," he said. "Suffice it to say that I have obligations that you cannot comprehend. I am subject to the gods, and I do their will, *not* yours."

"Well you're going to have to bend on that last part if you want your heir," Siri said.

Treledees obviously did not like how the conversation was going. He glanced at her hair. And, somehow, she kept it from showing even a slight bit of uncertainty. He looked back at her eyes.

"You can't kill me, Treledees," she said. "Not if you want a royal heir. You can't bully me or force me. Only the God King could do that. And, we know how *he* is."

"I don't know what you mean," Treledees said flatly.

"Oh, come now," Siri said. "Did you honestly expect me to sleep with the man and not find out he has no tongue? That he's virtually a child? I doubt he can even go to the privy without help from some servants."

Treledees flushed with anger.

He really does care, Siri noted abstractly. *Or, at least, insulting his God King insults him. He's more devoted than I would have expected.*

So it probably wasn't about money. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected that this was not the type of man to sell out his religion. Whatever the reasons for what was happening inside the palace, it probably had to do with true conviction.

Revealing what she knew about Susebron was a gamble. She figured that Treledees would guess anyway, and so it would be better to indicate that she thought Susebron a fool with the mind of a child. Give away one bit of information, but also mislead with another. If they assumed that she thought Susebron a fool, they wouldn't suspect an conspiracy between her and her husband.

Siri wasn't certain if she was doing the right thing. But she needed to learn, or Susebron would die. And the only way to learn was to do. She didn't have much, but she *did* have one thing that the priests wanted: her womb.

It seemed that she could hold it for ransom effectively, for Treledees suppressed his anger and maintained a semblance of calm. Turning from her, he glanced up at the palace. "Do you know much about the history of this kingdom? After your family departed, of course."

Siri frowned, surprised at the question. *More than you probably think,* she thought. "Not really," she said out loud.

"Lord Peacegiver left us with a challenge," Treledees said. "He gave us the treasure our God King now holds, a wealth of BioChromatic Breath such as nobody had ever seen. Over fifty thousand Breaths. He told us to keep them safe." Treledees turned back to her. "And he warned us not to use it."

Siri felt a slight shiver.

"I do not expect you to understand what we have done," Treledees said. "But it was necessary."

"Necessary to keep a man in bondage?" Siri said. "To deprive him of the ability to speak, to make a permanent child out of a grown man? He didn't even understand what he was supposed to do with a woman!"

"It was necessary," Treledees said, jaw set. "You Idrians. You don't even try to understand. I've had dealings with your father for years, and I sense the same ignorant prejudice in him."

He's baiting me, Siri thought, keeping her emotions in check. It was harder than she'd expected. "Believing in Austre instead of your living gods is not ignorance. After all, you're the ones who abandoned our faith and took an easier path."

"We follow the god who came to protect us when your Austre—an unseen, unknown thing—abandoned us to the destroyer Kalad. Peacegiver returned to life with a specific purpose—to stop the conflict between men, to bring peace again to Hallandren."

He glanced at her. "His name is holy. *He* is the one who gave us life, Vessel. And he only asked one thing of us: to care for his power. He died to give it to us, but demanded that it be held in case he should Return again and need it. We couldn't let it be used. We couldn't let it be profaned. Not even by our God King."

He fell silent.

So how do you get that treasure away from him to pass on? she thought. She was tempted to ask. Would that be giving away too much?

Finally, Treledees continued. "I see now why your father sent you instead of the other one. We should have studied all of the daughters, not just the first. You are far more capable than we had been led to believe." The statement surprised her, but she kept her hair in check. Treledees sighed, looking away.

"What are your demands? What will it take to make you return to your . . . duties each night?"

"My servants," she said. "I want to replace my main serving women with the women from Pahn Kahl."

"You are displeased with your serving women?"

"Not particularly," Siri said. "I simply feel that I have more in common with the women of Pahn Kahl. They, like me, are living in exile from their own people. Besides, I like the browns they wear."

"Of course," Treledees said, obviously thinking her Idrian prejudices were behind the request.

"The Hallandren girls can continue to serve in the roles that the Pahn Kahl women did," Siri said. "They don't have to leave me completely—in fact, I still want to talk to some of them. However, the main women who are with me always, they are to be from Pahn Kahl."

"As I said," Treledees said. "It shall be done. You'll return to your efforts, then?"

"For now," Siri said. "That will earn you a few more weeks."

Treledees frowned, but what could he really do? Siri smiled at him, then turned and walked away. However, she found herself dissatisfied with the way the conversation had gone. She'd achieved a victory—but at the cost of antagonizing Treledees even further.

I doubt he would have taken a liking to me, no matter how hard I tried, she decided, sitting down in her pavilion. *This is probably the better way.*

She still didn't know what was going to happen to Susebron; at least she had confirmed that manipulating the priests was possible. That meant something, though she knew she was treading dangerous ground. She turned back to her meal, ready to try another round of seafood. She did her best to learn about Hallandren, but if it came down to Susebron's life, she was going to get him out. She hoped that giving Bluefingers's Pahn Kahl a more prominent role in her service would facilitate that escape. She hoped.

With a sigh, she raised the first bit of food to her lips and continued with her tasting.

41

Vivenna presented her coin.

"One bit?" Cads asked. "That's all? One *single* bit?" He was among the dirtiest men she'd met, even in the streets. He liked fancy clothing, though. It was his style—worn and dirty clothing in the latest designs. He seemed to think it was funny. A mockery of the highborn.

He turned her coin over in his grime-covered fingers. "One bit," he repeated.

"Please," Vivenna whispered. They stood at the mouth of an alley at the back two restaurants. Just inside the alley, she could see urchins rooting in the garbage. Fresh garbage from *two* restaurants. She salivated.

"I find it hard to believe, lady girly," he said, "that *this* is all you made today."

"Please, Cads," she said again. "You know . . . you know I don't beg well." It was starting to rain. Again.

"You should do better," he said. "Even the children can bring me at least two."

Behind him, the fortunates who had pleased him continued to feast. It smelled so good. Or maybe that was the restaurants.

"I haven't eaten in days," she whispered, blinking away the rain.

"Then do better tomorrow," he said, shooing her away.

"My coin—"

Cads immediately waved for his toughs as she reached toward him. Vivenna shied away reflexively, stumbling.

"Two tomorrow," Cads said, walking into his alleyway. "I have to pay the restaurant owners, you know. Can't let you eat for free."

Vivenna stood, staring at him. Not because she thought she could get him to change his mind. But because she just had trouble making her mind understand. It was her last chance for food this day. One bit wouldn't buy anything more than a mouthful elsewhere, but here—last time—it had allowed her to eat until she was full.

That had been a week ago. How long had she been on the streets now? She didn't know. She turned, dully, and pulled her shawl tight. It was dusk. She should go beg some more.

She couldn't. Not after losing that bit. She felt shaken, as if her most valuable possession had been stolen.

No. *No.* She still had that. She pulled the shawl close.

Why was it important? She had trouble remembering.

She shuffled back toward the Highlands. Her home. A part of her realized that she shouldn't feel so distant from the person she had been. She was a princess, wasn't she? But she felt so sick lately, sick enough that she didn't even think she could feel the hunger anymore. It was all so wrong. So very, very wrong.

She entered the slums and crept along, careful to keep her head bowed, her back cowed, lest someone take offense at her. She hesitated as she walked, however, passing a street to her right. It was where the whores waited, protected from the drizzle by an awning.

Vivenna stared at them, standing in their revealing clothing. It was only two streets into the slum, a place that wasn't too threatening for outsiders. Everyone knew not to rob a man on his way to visit the whores. The slumlords didn't like it when their customers got scared away. Bad for business, as Denth might say.

Vivenna stood for a long moment. The whores looked fed. They weren't dirty. Several of them laughed. She could join them. An urchin had spoken of it the other day, mentioned that she was still young. He'd wanted her to come to the slumlord with him, hoping to get some coin for recruiting a willing girl.

It was so tempting. Food. Warmth. A dry bed.

Blessed Austre, she thought, shaking herself. *What am I thinking? What is*

wrong with my mind? It was so hard to focus. As if she were in a trance all the time.

She forced herself to keep moving, stumbling away from the women. She wouldn't do that. Not yet.

Not yet.

Oh, Lord of Colors, she thought with horror. *I need to get out of this city. Better for me to die, starving on the road back to Idris—better to get taken by Denth and tortured—than to end up in the brothel.*

However, much like the morality of stealing, the morality of using her body seemed much vaguer to her now, when her hunger was such a constant need. She made her way to her latest alleyway. She'd been kicked out of the others. But this one was good. It was secluded, yet often filled with younger urchins. Their company made her feel better, though she knew they searched her at night for coins.

I can't believe how tired I am . . . she thought, head spinning, putting her hand against the wall. She took a few deep breaths. The dizzy spells struck often these days.

She started forward again. The alleyway was empty, everyone else staying out in the evening to try for a few extra coins. She took the best of the spots—an earthen mound which had managed to grow a small tuft of grass. There weren't even that many lumps in the dirt, though it would be wet with mud from the light rain. She didn't care about that.

Shadows darkened the alleyway behind her.

Her reaction was immediate. She started to run. Living on the streets taught quick lessons. Weak as she was, in her panic she managed a burst of speed. Then another shadow stepped across the other end of the alley ahead of her. She froze, then turned to see a group of thugs moving up the alleyway behind her.

At their back was the man who had robbed her a few weeks ago, the one who had taken her dress. He looked chagrined. "Sorry, Princess," he said. "Bounty just got too high. Took me blasted long enough to find you, though. You did a great job of hiding."

Vivenna blinked. And then she simply let herself slide down to the ground.

I just can't take any more, she thought, wrapping her arms around herself. She was exhausted. Mentally, emotionally, completely. In a way, she was glad it was over. She didn't know what the men would do to her, but she did

know it was over. Whomever they sold her to wouldn't be careless enough to let her escape again.

The thugs clustered around her. She heard one mention taking her to Denth. Rough hands grabbed her arm, towing her to her feet. She followed with head bowed. They led her out onto the main street. It was growing dim, but no urchins or beggars made their way toward the alley.

I should have realized, she thought. *It was too deserted.*

Everything, finally, overwhelmed her. She couldn't summon the energy to care about escaping, not again. A part of her, deep inside, realized that her tutors had been right. When you were weak and hungry, it was hard to summon the energy to care about anything, even escape.

She had trouble remembering her tutors now. She had trouble even remembering what it was like to not be hungry.

The thugs stopped walking. Vivenna looked up, blinking away her dizziness. There was something in the dark, wet street in front of them. A black sword. The weapon, silver sheath and all, had been rammed into the dirt.

The street grew still. One of the thugs stepped forward, pulling the sword from the ground. He undid the sheath clasp. Vivenna felt a sudden nausea, more of a memory than a real sensation. She stumbled back, horrified.

The other thugs, transfixed, gathered up around their friend. One of them reached for the hilt.

The man carrying the sword struck. He swung the weapon, sheath and all, into the face of his friend. A black smoke began to twist off the sword, rising from the tiny sliver of blade that was visible.

Men cried out, each one scrambling for the sword. The man holding it continued to swing, the weapon hitting with far more force and damage than it should have. Bones broke, blood began to run on the cobblestones. The man continued to attack, moving with terrible speed. Vivenna, still stumbling backward, could see his eyes.

They were terrified.

He killed his last friend—the one who had robbed her on that day that now seemed so long ago—by slamming the sheathed sword down against the man's back. Bones cracked. By now, the clothing on the sword wielder's arm had disintegrated, and a blackness—like vines growing on a wall—had twisted up around his shoulder. Black, pulsing veins that bulged out of the skin. The man screamed a piercing, desperate cry.

Then he twisted the sword around and rammed it, sheath and all, through his chest. It cut skin and flesh, though the sheath itself didn't look sharpened. The man stumbled to his knees, then slumped backward, twitching, staring up into the air as the black veins on his arm began to evaporate. He died like that, kneeling, held upright by the sword that came out through his back, propping him up from behind.

Vivenna stood alone on a street littered with corpses. A figure descended from a rooftop, lowered by two twisting lengths of animated rope. He landed softly, ropes falling dead. He passed Vivenna, ignoring her, and grabbed the sword. He paused for a moment, then did up the clasp and pulled the weapon—sheath and all—free from the corpse.

The dead man finally fell to the ground.

Vivenna stared dully ahead. Then, numb, she sat down in the street. She didn't even flinch as Vasher picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

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Her Grace is not interested in seeing you," the priestess said, maintaining a reverent posture.

"Well I'm not interested in her uninterest," Lightsong said. "Perhaps you should ask her again, just to be sure."

The priestess bowed her head. "My pardons, Your Grace, but I have already asked fourteen times. Goddess Allmother is growing impatient with your requests, and she instructed me not to respond to them anymore."

"Did she give the same command to the other priestesses?"

The priestess paused. "Well, no, Your Grace."

"Wonderful," Lightsong said. "Send for one of them. Then send *her* to ask Allmother if she will see me."

The priestess sighed audibly; Lightsong considered that something of a victory. Allmother's priests were among the most pious—and most humble—in the court. If he could annoy them, he could annoy anyone.

He waited, hands on hips, as the priestess went to do his bidding. Allmother could give them orders and commands, but she couldn't tell them to completely ignore Lightsong. After all, he was a god too. As long as he asked them to something other than what Allmother had explicitly forbidden, they had to obey.

Even if it annoyed their goddess.

"I'm developing a new skill," Lightsong said. "Irritation by proxy!"

Llarimar sighed. "What about your speech to Goddess Blushweaver a few days ago, Your Grace? It seemed to imply that you were *not* going to annoy people as much."

"I said nothing of the sort," Lightsong said. "I simply said that I was coming to recognize within myself a little more of the person I used to be. That doesn't mean I'm going to discard all the progress I've made over the last few years."

"Your sense of self-awareness is remarkable, Your Grace."

"I know! Now, hush. The priestess is coming back."

Indeed, the woman approached and bowed before Lightsong on the grass. "My apologies, Your Grace. Our goddess, however, has now requested that *no* priestess be allowed to ask her if you can come in to see her."

"Did she tell them that they couldn't ask if she would come out here?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the priestess said. "And every other phrasing that would imply asking her to come within Your Grace's proximity, or communicate with him by letter, or relay messages from him in any form."

"Hum," he said, tapping his chin. "She's getting better. Well, I guess there's nothing to be done."

The priestess relaxed visibly.

"Scoot, set up my pavilion here in front of her palace," Lightsong said. "I'm going to be sleeping here tonight."

The priestess looked up.

"You're going to do *what*?" Llarimar asked.

Lightsong shrugged. "I'm not moving until I meet with her. That means staying until she acknowledges me. It's been over a week! If she wants to be stubborn, then I'll prove that I can be *equally* stubborn." He eyed the priestess. "I'm quite practiced at it, you know. Comes from being an insufferable buffoon, and all. I don't suppose she forbade you from allowing squirrels into the building?"

"Squirrels, Your Grace?" the woman asked.

"Excellent," Lightsong said, sitting down as his servants erected the pavilion. He pulled the Lifeless squirrel from its box and held it forward.

"Almond grass," he said quietly, giving the new Command he'd had his people imprint on the Lifeless. Then he spoke louder, so that the priestess could hear. "Go into the building, search out the Returned who lives in it, and

run around in circles squeaking as loudly as you can. Don't let anyone catch you. Oh, and destroy as much furniture as you can." Then, more quietly, he repeated, "Almond grass."

The squirrel immediately jumped off his hand and shot toward the palace. The priestess twisted her head to follow it, horrified. The squirrel began to screech with a sound that seemed amazingly un-squirrel-like. It disappeared into the building, slipping between the legs of a startled guard.

"What a delightful afternoon it's becoming," Lightsong said, reaching for a handful of grapes as the priestess rushed after the squirrel.

"It won't be able to follow all of those orders, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "It has the mind of a squirrel, despite the power that Breath gives it to obey Commands."

Lightsong shrugged. "We shall see."

He began to hear shouts of annoyance from inside the palace. He smiled.

It took longer than he had expected. Allmother was stubborn, as proved by Blushweaver's complete inability to manipulate her. As he sat—idly listening to a group of musicians—a priestess occasionally checked on him. Several hours passed. He didn't eat or drink very much so he didn't need to visit the privy.

He ordered his musicians to play louder. He had picked a group with a lot of percussion.

Finally, a frazzled-looking priestess came out of the palace. "Her Grace will see you," the woman said, bowing before Lightsong.

"Hum?" Lightsong said. "Oh, that. Do I have to go now? Can't I finish listening to this song?"

The priestess glanced up. "I—"

"Oh, very well then," Lightsong said, rising.

ALLMOTHER WAS STILL IN her audience chamber. Lightsong hesitated in the doorway—which, like those in every palace, was designed at the godly scale. He frowned to himself.

People still waited in a line and Allmother sat on a throne at the front of the room. She was stocky for a goddess, and he had always considered her white hair and wrinkled face an oddity within the pantheon. In bodily age, she was the oldest of the gods.

It had been a while since he'd come to visit her. In fact . . . *The last time I was here was the night before Calmseer gave up her Breath,* he realized. *That evening, years ago, when we shared what would be her last meal.*

He'd never come back. What would have been the point? They'd only gotten together in the first place because of Calmseer. On most of those occasions, Allmother had been quite vocal about what she thought of Lightsong. At least she was honest.

That was more than he could say for himself.

She didn't acknowledge him as he entered. She continued to sit, a little stooped over, listening to the man presenting his petition. He was middle-aged and stood awkwardly, leaning on a walking staff.

". . . my children are starving now," he said. "I cannot afford the food. I figured if my leg worked, I could go back to the docks." He looked down.

"Your faith is commendable," Allmother said. "Tell me, how did you lose the use of your leg?"

"A fishing accident, Your Grace," the man said. "I came down from the highlands a few years back, when early frosts took my crops. I took a job on one of the stormrunners—the ships who go out during the spring tempests, catching fish when others remain in the harbor. The accident crushed a barrel against me leg. Nobody will take me on to work the boats, not with a lame leg."

Allmother nodded.

"I wouldn't have come to you," he said. "But with my wife sick and my daughter crying with such hunger . . ."

Allmother reached a hand out, laying it on the man's shoulder. "I understand your difficulties, but your problems are not as severe as you may think. Go and speak with my high priest. I have a man on the docks who owes me allegiance. You have two good hands; you will be put to work sewing nets."

The man looked up, hope glimmering in his eyes.

"We will send you back with enough food to care for your family until you learn your new trade," Allmother said. "Go with my blessing."

The man rose, then fell back to his knees and began to cry. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Priests walked forward and led the man away. The room fell still, and Allmother looked over, meeting Lightsong's eyes. She nodded to the side, where a priest stepped up, holding a small bundle of fur tied tightly with ropes.

"That is yours, I am told?" Allmother asked.

"Ah, yes," Lightsong said, flushing slightly. "Terribly sorry. It kind of got away from me."

"With an accidental Command to find me?" Allmother asked. "Then run around in circles screaming?"

"That actually worked?" Lightsong said. "Interesting. My high priest didn't think the squirrel's brain would be capable of following such complicated Commands."

Allmother regarded him with a stern look.

"Oh," Lightsong said. "I mean, 'Whoops. It completely misunderstood me. Stupid squirrel.' My deepest apologies, honored sister."

Allmother sighed, then waved toward a doorway on the side of the room. Lightsong walked that way and she followed, a few servants trailing. Allmother moved with the stiffness of age. *Is it me, or does she look older than she did before?* That was, of course, impossible. Returned did not age. At least, not the ones who had reached maturity.

Once they were out of earshot and view of the petitioners, Allmother grabbed his arm. "What in the name of the Colors do you think you are doing?" she snapped.

Lightsong turned, raising an eyebrow. "Well, you wouldn't see me, and—"

"Do you intend to destroy what little authority we have left, you idiot?" Allmother asked. "Already, people in the city are saying that the Returned are growing weak, that the best of us died years ago."

"Maybe they're right."

Allmother scowled. "If too many of them believe that, then we lose our access to Breaths. Have you considered that? Have you considered what your lack of decorum, your flippancy, could cost all of us?"

"Is that the reason for the show then?" he asked, glancing back through the doorway.

"Once, the Returned didn't just listen to petitions and say yes or no," Allmother said. "They would take the time to hear each person who came to them, then seek to help them as best they could."

"Seems like an awful lot of trouble."

"We're their *gods.* Should a bit of trouble deter us?" She eyed him. "Oh, of course. We wouldn't want to let something as simple as the pains of our

people interfere with our leisure time. Why am I even talking to you?" She turned to leave the room.

"I came to give you my Lifeless Commands," Lightsong said.

Allmother froze.

"Blushweaver has control of two sets of the Commands," Lightsong said, "which gives her control of half of our armies. That worries me. I mean, I trust her as much as I trust any other Returned. But if war does come, then she'll quickly become the second-most-powerful person in the kingdom. Only the God King would have more authority."

Allmother regarded him with an unreadable expression.

"I figure that the best way to counter her is to have someone else who has two sets of Commands," Lightsong said. "Perhaps it will give her pause. Keep her from doing anything rash."

There was silence in the room.

"Calmseer trusted you," Allmother finally said.

"Her one flaw, I must profess," Lightsong said. "Even goddesses have them, or so it seems. I've found it gentlemanly to never point out such things."

"She was the best of us," Allmother said, glancing out in the direction of her supplicants. "She would meet with people all day. They loved her."

"Bottom line blue," Lightsong said. "That's my core security phrase. Please, take it. I'll tell Blushweaver that you bullied me into giving it to you. She'll be angry at me, of course, but it won't be the first time."

"No," Allmother finally said. "No, I'm not letting you out of this so easily, Lightsong."

"What?" he asked, startled.

"Can't you feel it?" she asked. "Something is happening in the city. This mess with the Idrians and their slums, the increasingly fierce arguments among our priests." She shook her head. "I'm not letting you wiggle out of your part. You were chosen for that place of yours. You're a god, like the rest of us, even if you do your best to pretend otherwise."

"You already have my Command, Allmother," he said with a shrug, walking toward a doorway to leave. "Do what you will with it."

"Verdant bells," Allmother said. "That's mine."

Lightsong froze in midstep.

"Now two of us know both of them," Allmother said. "If what you said earlier was true, then it's better that our Commands be distributed."

He spun. "You were just calling me a fool! Now you entrust me with command of your soldiers? I must ask, Allmother, and please think me not rude. But what in the name of the *Colors* is wrong with you?"

"I dreamed that you would come," she said, meeting his gaze. "I saw it in the pictures a week ago. All week, I've seen patterns of circles in the paintings, all red and gold. Your colors."

"Coincidence," he said.

She snorted quietly. "Someday, you'll have to get over your foolish selfishness, Lightsong. This isn't just about us. I've decided to start doing a better job of things. Perhaps you should take a look at who you are and what you are doing."

"Ah, my dear Allmother," Lightsong said. "You see, the problem in that challenge is the presumption that I haven't *tried* to be something other than what I am. Every time I do, disaster is the result."

"Well, you now have my Commands. For better, or for worse." The aged goddess turned away, walking back toward her room of supplicants. "I, for one, am curious to see how you handle them."

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Vivenna awoke, sick, tired, thirsty, starving.

But alive.

She opened her eyes, feeling a strange sensation. Comfort. She was in a comfortable soft bed. She sat up immediately; her head spun.

"I'd be careful," a voice said. "Your body is weak."

She blinked fuzzy eyes, focusing on a figure sitting at a table a short distance away, his back to her. He appeared to be eating.

A black sword in a silver sheath rested against the table.

"You," she whispered.

"Me," he said between bites.

She looked down at herself. She wasn't wearing her shift anymore, but instead had on a set of soft cotton sleeping garments. Her body was clean. She raised a hand to her hair, feeling that the tangles and mats were gone. It was still white.

She felt so strange to be clean.

"Did you rape me?" she asked quietly.

He snorted. "A woman who's been to Denth's bed holds no temptation for me."

"I never slept with him," she said, though she didn't know why she cared to tell him.

Vasher turned, face still framed by the patchy, ragged beard. His clothing

was far less fine than her own. He studied her eyes. "He had you fooled, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Idiot."

She nodded again.

He turned back to his meal. "The woman who runs this building," he said. "I paid her to bathe you, dress you, and change your bedpan. I never touched you."

She frowned. "What . . . happened?"

"Do you remember the fight on the street?"

"With your sword?"

He nodded.

"Vaguely. You saved me."

"I kept a tool out of Denth's hands," he said. "That's all that really matters."

"Thank you anyway."

He was silent for a few moments. "You're welcome," he finally said.

"Why do I feel so ill?"

"Tramaria," the man said. "It's a disease you don't have in the highlands. Insect bites spread it. You probably got it a few weeks before I found you. It stays with you, if you're weak."

She put a hand to her head.

"You probably had a pretty bad time lately," Vasher noted. "What with the dizziness, the dementia, and the hunger."

"Yes," she said.

"You deserved it." He continued to eat.

She didn't move for a long moment. His food smelled so good, but she'd apparently been fed during the fevers, for she wasn't as famished as she might have expected. Just mildly hungry. "How long was I unconscious?" she asked.

"A week," he said. "You should sleep some more."

"What are you going to do with me?"

He didn't reply. "The BioChromatic Breaths you had," he said. "You gave them to Denth?"

She paused, thinking. "Yes."

He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow.

"No," she admitted, looking away. "I put them in the shawl I was wearing."

He stood, leaving the room. She considered running. Instead, she got out of the bed and began to eat his food—a fish, whole and fried. Seafood didn't bother her anymore.

He returned, then stopped in the doorway, watching her ravage the fish bones. He didn't force her out of the seat; he simply took the other chair at the table. Finally, he held up the shawl, washed and clean.

"This?" he asked.

She froze, a bit of fish on her cheek.

He set the shawl on the table beside her.

"You're giving it back to me?" she asked.

He shrugged. "If there really is Breath stored in it, I can't get to it. Only you can."

She picked it up. "I don't know the Command."

He raised an eyebrow. "You escaped those ropes of mine without Awakening them?"

She shook her head. "I guessed that one."

"I should have gagged you better. What do you mean you 'guessed' it?"

"It was the first time I'd ever used Breath."

"That's right, you're of the royal line."

"What does that mean?"

He just shook his head, pointing toward the shawl. "Your Breath to mine," he said. "That's the Command you want."

She laid her hand on the shawl and said the words. Immediately, everything changed.

Her dizziness went away. Her deadness to the world vanished. She gasped, shaking with the pleasure of Breath restored. It was so strong that she actually fell from the chair, quivering like a person having a fit with the wonder of it. It was amazing. She could sense life. Could sense Vasher making a pocket of color around him that was bright and beautiful. She was *alive* again.

She basked in that for a long moment.

"It's shocking, when you first get it," Vasher said. "It's usually not too bad if you take the Breath back after only an hour or so. Wait weeks, or even a few days, and it's like taking it in for the first time."

Smiling, feeling amazing, she climbed back into the seat and wiped the fish from her face. "My sickness is gone!"

"Of course," he said. "You've got enough Breath for at least the Third Heightening, if I'm reading you right. You'll never know sickness. You'll barely even age. Assuming you manage to hang on to the Breath, of course."

She looked up at him in a panic.

"No," he said. "I'm not going to force you to give it to me. Though I probably should. You're far more trouble than you're worth, Princess."

She turned back to the food, feeling more confident. It seemed now as if the last few weeks had been a nightmare. A bubble, surreal, disconnected from her life. Had it really been she who had sat on the street, begging? Had she really slept in the rain, lived in the mud? Had she really considered turning to prostitution?

She had. She couldn't forget that just because she now had Breath again. But had becoming a Drab had a hand in her actions? Had the sickness had a part in it too? Either way, the greatest part had been simple desperation.

"All right," he said, standing, picking up the black sword. "Time to go."

"Go where?" she asked, suspicious. The last time she had met this man, he'd bound her, forced her to touch that sword of his, and left her gagged.

He ignored her concern, tossing a pile of clothing onto the table. "Put this on."

She picked through it. Thick trousers, a tunic that tucked into them, a vest to go over the tunic. All of various shades of blue. There were undergarments of a less bright color.

"That's a man's clothing," she said.

"It's utilitarian," Vasher said, walking toward the doorway. "I'm not going to waste money buying you fancy dresses, Princess. You'll just have to get used to those."

She opened her mouth, but then shut it, discarding her complaint. She'd just spent . . . she didn't know how long running around in a thin, nearly translucent shift that had only covered her to midthigh. She took the trousers and shirts gratefully.

"Please," she said, turning toward him. "I appreciate this clothing. But can I at least know what you intend to do with me?"

Vasher hesitated in the doorway. "I have work for you to do."

She shivered, thinking of the bodies Denth had shown her, and of the men Vasher had killed. "You're going to kill again, aren't you?"

He turned back toward her, frowning. "Denth is working toward something. I'm going to block him."

"Denth was working for me," she said. "Or, at least, he was pretending to. All of those things he did, they were at my command. He was just playing along to keep me complacent."

Vasher gave a barking laugh, and Vivenna flushed. Her hair—responding to her mood for the first time since her shock at seeing Parlin dead—turned red.

It felt so surreal. Two weeks on the street? It felt so much longer. But now, suddenly, she was cleaned and fed, and somehow she felt like her old self again. Part of it was the Breath. The beautiful, wonderful Breath. She never wanted to be parted from it again.

Not her old self at all. Who was she, then? Did it matter?

"You laugh at me," she said, turning to Vasher. "But I was just doing the best I could. I wanted to help my people in the upcoming war. Fight against Hallandren."

"Hallandren isn't your enemy."

"It is," she said sharply. "And it is planning to march on my people."

"The priests have good reasons for acting as they do."

Vivenna snorted. "Denth said that every man thinks he's doing the right thing."

"Denth is too smart for his own good. He was playing with you, Princess."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't it ever occur to you?" Vasher asked. "Attacking supply caravans? Rousing the Idrian poor to rebel? Reminding them of Vahr and his promises of freedom, which were so fresh in their minds? Showing yourself to thug lords, making them think that Idris was working to undermine the Hallandren government? Princess, you say every man thinks he's on the right side, that every man who opposed you was deluding himself." He met her eyes. "Didn't you ever once stop to think that maybe *you* were the one on the wrong side?"

Vivenna froze.

"Denth wasn't working for you," Vasher said. "He wasn't even pretending to. Someone in this city hired him to start a war between Idris and Hallandren, and he's spent these last few months using you to make it happen. I'm trying to figure out why. Who's behind it, and why would a war serve them?"

Vivenna sat back, eyes wide. It couldn't be. He had to be wrong.

"You were the perfect pawn," Vasher said. "You reminded the people in the slums of their true heritage, giving Denth someone to rally them behind. The Court of Gods is a hair's breadth away from marching on your homeland. Not because they hate Idrians, but because they feel like Idris insurgents have *already* been attacking them."

He shook his head. "I couldn't believe that you didn't realize what you were doing. I assumed you had to be working with him intentionally to start the war." He eyed her. "I underestimated your stupidity. Get dressed. I don't know if we have enough time to undo what you've done, but I intend to try."

THE CLOTHING FELT STRANGE. The trousers pulled at her thighs, making her feel like she was exposed. It was odd not to have the swishing of skirts at her ankles.

She walked beside Vasher without comment, head bowed, hair too short to even put into a braid. She didn't try to regrow it yet. That would draw needed nourishment from her body.

They passed through the Idrian slum, and Vivenna had to fight to keep herself from jumping at every sound, looking over her shoulder to see if someone was following her. Was that an urchin wanting to steal the money she'd begged? Was that a group of thugs, wishing to sell her to Denth? Were those shadows grey-eyed Lifeless, come to attack and slaughter? They passed a waif beside the road, a young woman of indeterminable age but with a soot-covered face and bright eyes that watched them. Vivenna could read the hunger in those eyes. The woman was trying to decide whether or not to try stealing from them.

The sword in Vasher's hand was obviously enough to ward the girl away. Vivenna watched her scurry down an alleyway, feeling an odd sense of connection.

Colors, she thought. *Was that really me?*

No. She hadn't even been as capable as that girl. Vivenna had been so naive that she'd been kidnapped without knowing it, then worked to start a war without realizing what she was doing.

Didn't you ever stop to think that maybe you were on the wrong side?

She wasn't sure what to believe. She'd been taken in so quickly by Denth that she was hesitant to accept anything this Vasher said. However, she *could* see signs that some of what he had told her were true.

Denth had always taken her to meet with the less reputable elements in the city. Not only were they the ones a mercenary like him would know, but they would be more likely to prefer the chaos of war. Attacking the Hallandren supplies wouldn't only make it more difficult to administer the war, it would make the priests more likely to attack while they were still strong. The losses would also serve to make them angrier.

It made chilling sense—sense it was hard for her to ignore. "Denth made me think that the war was inevitable," Vivenna whispered as they walked through the slums. "My father thinks it's inevitable. Everyone says it's going to happen."

"They're wrong," Vasher said. "War between Hallandren and Idris has been close for decades, but never inevitable. Getting this kingdom to attack requires convincing the Returned—and they're generally too focused on themselves to want something as disruptive as a war. Only an extended effort—first convincing the priests, then getting them to argue until the gods believed them—would be successful."

Vivenna stared ahead down the dirty streets with their colorful refuse. "I really am useless, aren't I?" she whispered.

Vasher glanced over at her.

"First, my father sent my sister to marry the God King instead of me. I followed, but I didn't even know what I was doing—Denth took me on the very first day I was here. When I finally escaped him, I couldn't make it a month on the street without getting robbed, beaten, and then captured. Now you claim that I've single-handedly brought my people to the edge of war."

Vasher snorted. "Don't give yourself *too* much credit. Denth has been working on this war for a long time. From what I hear, he corrupted the Idrian ambassador himself. Plus there are elements in the Hallandren government—the ones who hired Denth in the first place—who want this conflict to happen."

It was all so confusing. What he said made sense, but Denth had made sense too. She needed to know more. "Do you have any guesses who they might be? The ones who hired Denth?"

Vasher shook his head. "One of the gods, I think—or perhaps a cabal of them. Maybe a group of priests, working on their own."

They fell silent again.

"Why?" Vivenna finally asked.

"How should I know?" Vasher asked. "I can't even figure out *who's* behind it."

"No," Vivenna said. "Not that. I mean, why are you involved? Why do you care?"

"Because," Vasher said.

"Because why?"

Vasher sighed. "Look, Princess. I'm not like Denth; I don't have his ability with words, and I don't really like people in the first place. Don't expect me to chat with you. All right?"

Vivenna shut her mouth in surprise. *If he's trying to manipulate me,* she thought, *he has a very strange way of doing it.*

Their destination turned out to be a run-down building on the corner of a run-down intersection. As they approached, Vivenna paused to wonder exactly how slums like this one came to exist. Did people build them cramped and shoddy on purpose? Had these streets, like others she'd seen, once been part of a better section of town that had fallen into disrepair?

Vasher grabbed her arm as she stood there, then pulled her up to the door, upon which he pounded with the hilt of his sword. The door creaked open a second later, and a pair of nervous eyes glanced out.

"Get out of the way," Vasher said, testily shoving the door open the rest of the way and pulling Vivenna inside. A young man stumbled back, pressing up against the wall of the hallway and letting Vasher and Vivenna pass. He closed the door behind them.

Vivenna felt as if she should be frightened, or at least angry, at the treatment. However, after what she had been through, it just didn't seem like much. Vasher let go of her and thumped his way down a set of stairs. Vivenna followed more carefully, the dark stairwell reminding her of the cellar in Denth's hideout. She shivered. At the bottom, fortunately, the similarities between cellars ended. This one had a wooden floor and walls. A rug sat in the middle of the room with a group of men sitting on it. A couple of them rose as Vasher rounded the stairs.

"Vasher!" one said. "Welcome. Do you want something to drink?"

"No."

The men glanced uncomfortably at each other as Vasher tossed his sword toward the side of the room. It hit with a clank, skidding on the wood. Then he reached back and pulled Vivenna forward.

"Hair," he said.

She hesitated. He was using her just as Denth had. But rather than make him angry, she obliged, changing the color of her hair. The men watched with awe; then several of them bowed their heads. "Princess," one whispered.

"Tell them you don't want them to go to war," Vasher said.

"I don't," she said honestly. "I have never wanted my people to fight Hallandren. They would lose, almost certainly."

The men turned to Vasher. "But she was working with the slumlords. Why did she change her mind?"

Vasher looked at her. "Well?"

Why did she change her mind? *Had* she changed her mind? It was all too quick.

"I . . ." she said. "I'm sorry. I . . . didn't realize. I've *never* wanted war. I thought it was inevitable, and so I tried to plan for it. I might have been manipulated, though."

Vasher nodded, then pushed her aside. He left her and joined the men as they sat back on the rug. Vivenna remained where she was. She wrapped her hands around herself, feeling the unfamiliar cloth of the tunic and coat.

These men are Idrians, she realized, listening to their accents. *And now they've seen me, their princess, wearing a man's clothing. How is it that I can still care about such things, considering everything else that is happening?*

"All right," Vasher said, squatting. "What are you doing to stop this?"

"Wait," one of the men said. "You expect that to change our minds? A few words from the princess, and we're supposed to believe everything you've been telling us?"

"If Hallandren goes to war, you're dead," Vasher snapped. "Can't you see that? What do you think will happen to the Idrians in these slums? You think things are bad now, wait until you're seen as enemy sympathizers."

"We know that, Vasher," another said. "But what do you expect us to do? Submit to Hallandren treatment of us? Cave in and worship their indolent gods?"

"I don't really care what you do," Vasher said, "as long as it doesn't involve threatening the security of the Hallandren government."

"Maybe we *should* just admit that war is coming and fight," another said. "Maybe the slumlords are right. Maybe the best thing to do is hope that Idris wins."

"They hate us," another of them said, a man in his twenties with anger in his eyes. "They treat us worse than they do the statues in their streets! We're less than Lifeless, to them."

I know that anger, Vivenna realized. *I felt it. Feel it still. Anger at Hallandren.*

The man's words rang hollow to her now. The truth was, she hadn't really felt any ire from the Hallandren people. If anything, she'd felt indifference. She was just another body on the street to them.

Perhaps that's why she hated them. She'd worked all of her life to become something important for them—in her mind, she'd been dominated by the monster that was Hallandren and its God King. And then, in the end, the city and its people had simply ignored her. She didn't matter to them. And that was infuriating.

One of the Idrian men, an older man wearing a dark tan cap, shook his head in thought. "The people are restless, Vasher. Half the men talk of storming the Court of Gods in anger. The women store up food, waiting for the inevitable. Our youths go out in secret groups, searching the jungles for Kalad's legendary army."

"They believe that old myth?" Vasher asked.

The man shrugged. "It offers hope. A hidden army, powerful enough that it nearly ended the Manywar itself."

"Believing myths isn't what frightens me," another man said. "It's that our youths would even *think* of using Lifeless as soldiers. Kalad's Phantoms. Bah!" He spat to the side.

"What it means is that we're desperate," one of the older men said. "The people are angry. We can't stop the riots, Vasher. Not after that slaughter a few weeks back."

Vasher pounded the floor with a fist. "That's what they want! Can't you fools see that you're giving your enemies perfect scapegoats? Those Lifeless that attacked the slum weren't given their orders by the government. Someone slipped a few broken Lifeless into the group with orders to kill so that things would turn ugly!"

What? Vivenna thought.

"The Hallandren theocracy is a top-heavy structure laden with bureaucratic foolishness and inertia," Vasher said. "It never moves unless someone pushes it! If we have riots in the street, that will be just what the war faction needs."

I could help him, Vivenna thought, watching the reactions of the Idrians. She knew them instinctively in a way Vasher obviously didn't. He made good arguments, but he approached them in the wrong way. He needed credibility.

She could help. But should she?

Vivenna didn't know what to think anymore. If Vasher was right, she'd been played like a puppet by Denth. She believed that was true, but how could she know that Vasher wasn't doing the same thing?

Did she want war? No, of course she didn't. Particularly not a war Idris would have a very hard time surviving, let alone winning. Vivenna had worked so hard to undermine Hallandren's ability to wage war. Why hadn't she ever considered trying to head it off?

I did, she realized. *That was my original plan when I was back in Idris. I'd intended to talk the God King out of war when I became his bride.*

She'd given up on that plan. No, she'd been manipulated into giving up on it. Either by her father's sense of inevitability or by Denth's subtlety—or by both—it didn't really matter. Her initial instinct had been to prevent the conflict. That was the best way to protect Idris; and it was—she now realized—also the best way to protect Siri. She'd practically given up on saving her sister, focusing on her own hate and arrogance instead.

Stopping the war wouldn't protect Siri from being abused by the God King. But it would probably keep her from being used as a pawn or a hostage. It could save her life.

That was enough for Vivenna.

"It's too late," one of the men said.

"No," Vivenna said. "Please."

The men in the circle paused, looking over at her. She walked back to the circle and then knelt before them. "Please do not say such things."

"But Princess," one of the men said, "what can we do? The slumlords rile the people to anger. We have no power compared to them."

"You must have some influence," she said. "You seem like men of wisdom."

"We're family men and workers," another said. "We have no riches."

"But people listen to you?" she asked.

"Some do."

"Then tell them that there *are* more options," Vivenna said, bowing her head. "Tell them to be stronger than I was. The Idrians here in the slums—I've seen their strength. If you tell them that they've been used, maybe they can avoid being manipulated further."

The men fell silent.

"I don't know if everything this man says is true," she said, nodding to Vasher. "But I do know that Idris will not win this war. We should be doing everything we can to prevent a conflict, not to encourage one." She felt a tear on her cheek, and her hair had grown a pale white. "You can see. I . . . no longer have the control a princess and follower of Austre should show. I am a disgrace to you, but please don't let my failure doom you. The Hallandren don't hate us. They barely even notice us. I know this is frustrating, but if you *make* them notice you by rioting and destroying, they will only be shaken into anger against our homeland."

"So we should just roll over?" the younger man asked. "Let them step on us? What does it matter if they do it unintentionally? We still get crushed."

"No," Vivenna said. "There must be a better way. An Idrian is their queen, now. Perhaps, if we give them time, they will get over their prejudice. We *must* focus our energies now on keeping them from attacking!"

"Your words make sense, Princess," said the older man wearing the cap. "But—and forgive me for my ostentation—those of us here in Hallandren find it difficult to care about Idris much anymore. It failed us before we even left, and now we can't really go back."

"We *are* Idrians," one of the others said. "But . . . well, our families here are more important."

A month ago, Vivenna would have been offended. Her sojourn on the streets, though, had taught her a little of what desperation could do to a person. What was Idris to them if their families starved? She could not blame them for their attitude.

"You think you will fare better if Idris is conquered?" Vasher asked. "If there's war, you'll be treated even worse than you are now."

"There *are* other options," Vivenna said. "I know of your plight. If I return to my father and explain it, perhaps we can find a way to return you to Idris."

"Return us to Idris?" one of the men said. "My family has been here in Hallandren for fifty years now!"

"Yes, but as long as the king of Idris lives," Vivenna said, "you have an ally. We can work with diplomacy to make things better for you."

"The king doesn't care about us," another said sadly.

"I care," Vivenna said.

And she did. She found it strange, but a part of her felt more of a kinship with the Idrians in the city than with those she had left behind. She understood.

"We must find a way to bring attention to your suffering without bringing hatred as well," she said. "We will find a way. As I said, my sister is married to the God King himself. Perhaps through her, he can be persuaded to improve the slums. Not because he's afraid of the violence our people might cause, but because of the pity he feels for their situation."

She continued to kneel, ashamed before these men. Ashamed to be crying, to be seen in the immodest clothing and with ragged, short hair. Ashamed to have failed them so completely.

How could I fail so easily? she thought. *I, who was supposed to be so prepared, so in control. How could I be so angry that I ignored my people's needs just because I wanted to see Hallandren pay?*

"She is sincere," one of the men finally said. "I will give her that."

"I don't know," said another. "I still feel it's too late."

"If that's the case," Vivenna said, still looking at the floor, "what do you have to lose? Think of the lives you could save. I promise. Idris will not forget you any longer. If you make peace with Hallandren, I will insure that you are seen as heroes back in our homeland."

"Heroes, eh?" one of them said. "It would be nice to be known as a hero, rather than the ones who left the highlands to live in brazen Hallandren."

"Please," Vivenna whispered.

"I'll see what I can do," one of the men said, standing.

Several of the others voiced agreement. They stood as well, shaking hands with Vasher. Vivenna remained kneeling as they left.

Eventually, the room was empty save for her and Vasher. He sat down across from her.

"Thanks," he said.

"I didn't do it for you," she whispered.

"Get up," he said. "Let's go. I want to meet with someone else."

"I . . ." She sat up on the rug, trying to make sense of her feelings. "Why should I do as you tell me? How do I know that you're not just using me? Lying to me. Like Denth did."

"You don't know," Vasher said, recovering his sword from the corner. "You'll just have to do what I say."

"Am I a prisoner then?"

He glanced at her. Then he walked over and squatted. "Look," he said. "We both agree that war is bad for Idris. I'm not going to take you on raids or make you meet with slumlords. All you have to do is tell people you don't want a war."

"And if I'm not willing to do that?" she said. "Will you force me?"

He watched her for a moment, then swore under his breath, standing. He pulled out a bag of something and tossed it at her. It clinked as it hit her chest then fell to the floor.

"Go," he said. "Get back to Idris. I'll do it without you."

She just continued to sit, staring. He began to walk away.

"Denth used me," she found herself whispering. "And the worst part is, I still feel like this must all be just a misunderstanding. I feel that he's really my friend, and that I should go to him and find out why he did what he did. Maybe we are all just confused."

She closed her eyes, resting her head on her knees. "But then I remember the things I saw him do. My friend Parlin is dead. Other soldiers sent by my father, stuffed in sacks. I'm so confused."

The room fell silent. "You're not the first one he's taken in, Princess," Vasher finally said. "Denth . . . he's a subtle one. A man like him can be evil to the core, but if he is charismatic and amusing, people will listen to him. They'll even like him."

She looked up, blinking teary eyes.

Vasher turned away. "Me," he said. "I'm not like that. I have trouble talking. I get frustrated. I snap at people. Doesn't make me very popular. But I promise you that I won't lie to you." He met her eyes. "I want to stop this war. That's all that really matters to me right now. I promise you."

She wasn't sure if she believed him. Yet she found herself wanting to. *Idiot,* she thought. *You're just going to get taken in again.*

She hadn't proven herself a very good judge of character. Still, she didn't pick up the bag of coins. "I am willing to help. Assuming it doesn't involve anything more than telling others that I wish to keep Idris from harm."

"Good enough."

She hesitated. "Do you really think we can do it. Stop the war?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Assuming I can keep myself from beating the Colors out of all these Idrians for acting like idiots."

A pacifist with temper-control issues, she thought ruefully. *What a combination. A little like a devout Idrian princess who holds enough BioChromatic Breath to populate a small village.*

"There are more places like this," Vasher said. "I would show you to the people there."

"All right," she said, trying not to look at the blade as she stood. Even now, it had a strange ability to make her feel sick.

Vasher nodded. "There won't be many people at each meeting. I don't have Denth's connections, and I'm not friendly with important people. The ones I know are workers. We'll have to go visit the dye vats, perhaps even some of the fields."

"I understand," she said.

Without further comment, Vasher picked up his bag of coins, then led her out onto the street. *And so,* she thought, *I begin again.*

I can only hope that this time, I'm on the right side.

44

Siri watched Susebron with affection as he ate a third dessert. Their night's meal lay spread out on the table and floor, some dishes completely devoured, others barely tasted. That first night when Susebron had ordered a meal had started a tradition. Now they ordered food every night—though only after Siri did her act for the listening priests. Susebron claimed to find it very amusing, though she noticed the curiosity in his eyes as he watched her.

Susebron had proven to have quite a sweet tooth now that disapproving priests and their sense of etiquette were absent. "You should probably watch out," she noted as he finished another pastry. "If you eat too many of those, you will get fat."

He reached for his writing board. *No I won't.*

"Yes you will," she said, smiling. "That's the way it works."

Not for gods, he wrote. *My mother explained it. Some men become more bulky if they exercise a lot and become fat if they eat a lot. That doesn't happen to Returned. We always look the same.*

Siri couldn't offer argument. What did she know of Returned?

Is food in Idris like this? Susebron wrote.

Siri smiled. He was always so curious about her homeland. She could sense a longing in him, the wish to be free of his palace and see the outside. And yet, he didn't want to be disobedient, even when the rules were harsh.

"I really need to work on corrupting you some more," she noted.

He paused. *What does that have to do with food?*

"Nothing," she said. "But it's true nonetheless. You're far too good a person, Susebron."

Sarcasm? he wrote. *I certainly hope that it is.*

"Only half," she said, lying down on her stomach and watching him across their impromptu picnic setting.

Half-sarcasm? he wrote. *Is this something new?*

"No," she said, sighing. "There is truth sometimes even in sarcasm. I don't *really* want to corrupt you, but I do think that you're just too perfectly obedient. You need to be a little more reckless. Impulsive and independent."

It's hard to be impulsive when you are locked in a palace surrounded by hundreds of servants, he wrote.

"Good point."

However, I have been thinking about the things you've said. Please don't be mad at me.

Siri perked up, noting the embarrassment in his expression. "All right. What did you do?"

I talked to my priests, he said. *With the artisans' script.*

Siri felt a moment of panic. "You told them about us?"

No, no, he wrote quickly. *I did tell them I was worried about having a child. I asked why my father died right after he had a child.*

Siri frowned. Part of her wished that he'd let her handle such negotiations. However, she said nothing. She didn't want to keep him pinned down as his priests did. It was his life that was being threatened—he deserved the chance to work on the problem too.

"Good," she said.

You're not mad?

She shrugged. "I was just encouraging you to be more impulsive! I can't complain now. What did they say?"

He erased, then continued. *They told me not to worry. They said everything would be all right. So I asked them again, and again they gave me a vague answer.*

Siri nodded slowly.

It hurts me to write this, but I'm beginning to think that you are right. I've noticed that my guards and Awakeners are staying particularly close lately. We even skipped going to the Court Assembly yesterday.

"That's a bad sign," she agreed. "I haven't had much luck finding out what is going to happen. I've ordered in three other storytellers but none of them had any better information than what Hoid gave me."

You still think it's about the Breath I hold?

She nodded. "Remember what I said about my conversation with Treledees? He talked about that Breath of yours with reverence. To him, it's something to be passed from generation to generation, like a family tapestry."

In one of the children's stories in my book, he wrote, *there is a magic sword. A young boy is given it by his grandfather, and it turns out the sword was a heirloom—the symbol of kingship in the land.*

"What are you saying?" she asked.

Perhaps the entire monarchy of Hallandren is nothing more than a way to guard the Breath. The only way to safely pass Breath between individuals and generations is to use people as hosts. So they created a dynasty of God Kings who could hold the treasure and pass it from father to son.

Siri nodded slowly. "That would mean that the God King is more of a vessel than I am. A sheath for a magic weapon."

Exactly, Susebron wrote, hand moving quickly. *They had to make my family kings because of how much Breath was in that treasure. And they had to give it to a Returned—otherwise their king and their gods might have competed for power.*

"Perhaps. It seems awfully convenient that the God King always bears a stillborn son who becomes Returned . . ."

She trailed off. Susebron saw it too.

Unless the next God King isn't really the son of the current one, he wrote, hand shaking slightly.

"Austre!" Siri said. "God of Colors! That's it. Somewhere in the kingdom, a baby died and Returned. That's why it's so urgent that I get pregnant! They already have the next God King, now they just need to keep up the farce. They marry me to you, hope for a child as quickly as possible, then switch the baby for the Returned one."

Then they kill me and somehow take my Breaths away, he wrote. *And give it to this child, who can become the next God King.*

"Wait. Do infants even Return?" she asked.

Yes, he wrote.

"But, how does an *infant* Return in a way that is heroic, or virtuous, or anything like that?"

Susebron hesitated, and she could tell he didn't have an answer for her. Infant Returned. Among her own people, they didn't believe that a person was chosen to Return because of some virtue they exemplified. That was a Hallandren belief. To her, it seemed a hole in their theology, but she didn't want to challenge Susebron on it further. He already worried about how she didn't believe in his divinity.

Siri sat back. "That doesn't really matter. The real question is more important. If the God Kings are just vessels to hold Breath, then why bother changing them? Why not just leave one man holding the Breath?"

I don't know, Susebron wrote. *It doesn't seem to make sense, does it? Maybe they are worried about keeping a single God King captive that long. Children are easier to control, perhaps?*

"If that's the case, they would want to change *more* often," Siri said. "Some of those God Kings lasted centuries. Of course, it could just have to do with how rebellious they think their king is."

I do everything I'm supposed to! You just complained that I am too obedient.

"Compared to me, you are," she said. "Maybe from their viewpoint, you're a wild man. After all, you did hide that book your mother gave you, and then you learned to write. Perhaps they know you well enough to realize that you weren't going to stay docile. So now that they have an opportunity to replace you, they're intending to take it."

Maybe, he wrote.

Siri thought through their conclusions again. Looked at critically, she could see that they were just speculations. Yet everyone said that the other Returned couldn't have children, and so why would the God King be different? That might just be a means of obfuscating the fact that they were bringing in a new person to be God King when they found one.

That still didn't answer the most important question. What were they going to do to Susebron to get his Breaths away from him?

Susebron leaned back, staring up at the dark ceiling. Siri watched him, noting the look of sadness in his eyes. "What?" she asked.

He just shook his head.

"Please? What is it?"

He sat for a moment, then looked down, writing. *If what you say is true, then the woman who raised me was not my mother. I would have been born to someone random out in the countryside. The priests would have taken me once I*

Returned, then raised me in the palace as the "son" of the God King they'd just killed.

Seeing him in pain made her insides twist. She moved around the blanket, sitting beside him, putting her arms around him and resting her head on his arm.

She's the only person to have shown me real kindness in my life, he wrote. *The priests, they revere me and care for me—or, at least, I assumed that they did. However, they never really loved me. Only my mother did that. And now I'm not sure I even know who she is.*

"If she raised you, she's your mother," Siri said. "It doesn't matter who gave birth to you."

He didn't respond to that.

"Maybe she was your real mother," Siri said. "If they were going to bring you to the palace in secret, they might as well bring your mother too. Who better to care for you?"

He nodded, then scribbled on the board with one hand—the other was around Siri's waist. *Perhaps you are right. Though it now seems suspicious to me that she would die as she did. She was one of the few who could have told me the truth.*

This seemed to make him even more sad, and Siri pulled him closer, laying her head on his chest.

Please, he wrote. *Tell me of your family.*

"My father was often frustrated with me," Siri said. "But he did love me. *Does* love me. He just wanted me to do what they thought was right. And . . . well, the more time I spend in Hallandren, the more I wish I had listened to him, at least a little bit.

"Ridger was right above me. I was always getting him into trouble. He was the heir, and I had him *thoroughly* corrupted, at least until he got old enough to appreciate his duties. He's a little like you. Very kindhearted, always trying to do what is right. He didn't eat as many sweets, though."

Susebron smiled faintly, squeezing her shoulder.

"Then there was Fafen. I didn't really know her that well. She joined a monastery when I was still quite young—and I was glad. It's seen as a duty in Idris to provide at least one child for the monasteries. They're the ones who grow the food for the needy and take care of things that need to be done around the city. Pruning, washing, painting. Anything to be of service."

He reached over. *A little like a king,* he wrote. *Living a life to serve others.*

"Sure," Siri said. "Only they don't get locked up and they can stop doing it, if they want. Either way, I'm glad it was Fafen and not me. I would have gone *crazy* living as a monk. They have to be pious all the time, and are supposed to be the least ostentatious in the city."

Not a good match for your hair, he wrote.

"Definitely," she said.

Though, he wrote, frowning slightly. *It's stopped changing colors so often lately.*

"I've had to learn to control it better," Siri said with a grimace. "People can read me too easily by it. Here." She changed it from black to yellow, and he smiled, running his fingers through its lengthy locks.

"After Fafen," Siri said, "there's just the eldest, Vivenna. She's the one you were supposed to marry. She spent her entire life preparing to move to Hallandren."

She must hate me, Susebron wrote. *Growing up knowing she would have to leave her family and live with a man she didn't know.*

"Nonsense," Siri said. "Vivenna looked forward to it. I don't think she *can* feel hatred. She was always just calm and careful and perfect."

Susebron frowned.

"I sound bitter, don't I?" Siri said, sighing. "I don't mean to. I really do love Vivenna. She was always there, watching out for me. But it seemed to me that she made too many efforts to cover up for me. My big sister, pulling me out of trouble, scolding me calmly, then seeing that I wasn't punished as much as I should have been." She hesitated. "They're all probably at home right now, worried sick about me."

You sound like you're worried about them, he wrote.

"I am," she said. "I've been listening to the priests argue in the court. It doesn't sound good, Seb. There are a lot of Idrians in the city and they're being very reckless. The city guard was forced to send troops into one of the slums a few weeks back. That isn't helping reduce tensions between our countries."

Susebron didn't write a response, but instead wrapped his arm around her again, pulling her close. It felt good to be held against him. Very good.

After a few minutes, he pulled his arm away and wrote again, awkwardly erasing first. *I was wrong, you know.*

"About what?"

About one of the things I said earlier. I wrote that my mother was the only person to ever show me love and kindness. That's not true. There's been another.

He stopped writing and looked at her. Then he glanced at the board again. *You didn't have to show me kindness,* he wrote. *You could have hated me for taking you from your family and your homeland. Instead, you taught me to read, befriended me. Loved me.*

He stared at her. She stared at him. Then, hesitant, he leaned down and kissed her.

Oh, dear . . . Siri thought, a dozen objections popping into her head. She found it difficult to move, to resist, or to do anything.

Anything other than kiss him back.

She felt hot. She knew that they needed to stop, lest the priesthood get exactly what they were waiting for. She *understood* all of these things. Yet those objections began to seem less and less rational as she kissed him, as her breathing grew more hurried.

He paused, obviously uncertain what to do next. Siri looked up at him, breathing heavily, then pulled him down to kiss him again, feeling her hair bleed to a deep, passionate red.

At that point, she stopped caring about anything else. Susebron didn't know what to do. But she did. *I really am too hasty,* she thought as she pulled off her shift. *I need to get better at controlling my impulses.*

Some other time.

45

That night, Lightsong dreamed of T'Telir burning. Of the God King dead and of soldiers in the streets. Of Lifeless killing people in colorful clothing.

And of a black sword.

46

Vivenna choked down her meal. The dried meat tasted strongly of fish, but she had learned that by breathing through her mouth, she could ignore much of the flavor. She ate every bite, then washed the taste away with a few mouthfuls of warm boiled water.

She was alone in the room. It was a small chamber built onto the side of a building near the slums. Vasher had paid a few coins for a day in it, though he wasn't there at the moment. He'd rushed off to deal with something.

She leaned back, food consumed, closing her eyes. She'd reached the point where she was so exhausted that she actually found it difficult to sleep. The fact that the room was so small didn't help. She couldn't even stretch out all the way.

Vasher hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that their work would be rigorous. Stop after stop, she spoke with the Idrians, consoling them, begging them not to push Hallandren to war. There were no restaurants as there had been with Denth. No dinners with men in fine clothing and guards. Just group after group of tired, working-class men and women. Many of them weren't rebellious and a large number of them didn't even live in the slums. But they were part of the Idrian community in T'Telir, and they could influence how their friends and family felt.

She liked them. Empathized with them. She felt far better about her new efforts than she had about her work with Denth, and so far as she could tell,

Vasher was being honest with her. She had decided to trust those instincts. That was her decision, and that decision meant helping Vasher, for now.

Vasher didn't ask her if she wanted to continue. He simply led her from location to location, expecting her to keep up. And so she did, meeting with the people and begging their forgiveness, despite how emotionally draining it was. She wasn't certain if she could repair what she had done, but she was willing to try. This determination seemed to gain her some respect from Vasher. It was much more reluctantly given than Denth's respect had been.

Denth was fooling me the entire time. It was still hard to remember that fact. Part of her didn't want to. She leaned forward, staring at the bland wall in front of her in the boxlike room. She shivered. It was a good thing that she'd been working herself so hard lately. It kept her from thinking about things.

Discomforting things.

Who was she? How did she define herself now that everything she'd been, and everything she'd tried, had collapsed around her? She couldn't be Vivenna the confident princess anymore. That person was dead, left behind in that cellar with Parlin's bloody corpse. Her confidence had come from naïveté.

Now she knew how easily she had been played. She knew the cost of ignorance, and she had glimpsed the grim truths of real poverty.

Yet, she also couldn't be *that* woman—the waif of the streets, the thief, the beaten-down wretch. That wasn't her. She felt as if those weeks had been a dream, brought on by the stress of isolation and trauma of her betrayal, fueled by becoming a Drab and being suffocated by disease. To pretend that was the real her would be to parody those who truly lived on the streets. The people she'd hidden among and tried to imitate.

Where did that leave her? Was she the penitent, quiet princess who knelt with bowed head, pleading with the peasants? This, too, was partially an act. She really did feel sorry. However, she was using her stripped pride as a tool. That wasn't her.

Who was she?

She stood up, feeling cramped in the tiny room, and pushed open the door. The neighborhood outside wasn't quite a slum, but it wasn't rich either. It was simply a place where people lived. There were enough colors along to street to be welcoming, but the buildings were small and held a number of families each.

She walked along the street, careful not to stray too far from the room Vasher had rented. She passed trees, admiring their blooms.

Who was she really? What was left, when one stripped away the princess and the hatred of Hallandren? She was determined. That part of her, she liked. She'd forced herself to become the woman she needed to be in order to marry the God King. She'd worked hard, sacrificing, to reach her goal.

She was also a hypocrite. Now she knew what it was to be truly humble. Compared to that, her former life seemed more brash and arrogant than any colorful skirt or shirt.

She did believe in Austre. She loved the teachings of the Five Visions. Humility. Sacrifice. Seeing another's problems before your own. Yet she was beginning to think that she—along with many others—had taken this belief too far, letting her desire to seem humble become a form of pride itself. She now saw that when her faith had become about clothing instead of people, it had taken a wrong turn.

She wanted to learn to Awaken. Why? What did that say about her? That she was willing to accept a tool her religion rejected, just because it would make her powerful?

No, that wasn't it. At least, she hoped it wasn't it.

Looking back on her recent life, she felt frustrated at her frequent helplessness. And *that* felt like part of whom she really was. The woman who would do anything to be sure she wasn't helpless. That was why she'd studied so hard with the tutors in Idris. That was also why she wanted to learn how to Awaken. She wanted as much information as she could, and wanted to be prepared for the problems that might come at her.

She wanted to be capable. That might be arrogant, but it was the truth. She wanted to learn everything she could about how to survive in the world. The most humiliating aspect of her time in T'Telir was her ignorance. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

She nodded to herself.

Time to practice, then, she thought, returning to the room. Inside, she pulled out a piece of rope—the one that Vasher had used to tie her up, the first thing that she had Awakened. She'd since retrieved the Breath from it.

She went back outside, holding the rope between her fingers, twisting it, thinking. *The Commands that Denth taught me were simple phrases. Hold things. Protect me.* He'd implied that the intent was important. When she'd

Awakened her bonds, she'd made them move as if part of her body. It was more than just the Command. The Command brought the life, but the intent—the instructions from her mind—brought focus and action.

She stopped beside a large tree with thin, blossom-laden branches that drooped toward the ground. She stood beside a branch, touched the bark of the tree's trunk itself to use its color. She held out the rope to the branch. "Hold things," she Commanded, reflexively letting out some of her Breath. She felt an instant of panic as her sense of the world dimmed.

The rope twitched. However, instead of drawing color from the tree, the Awakening pulled color from her tunic. The garment bled grey, and the rope moved, wrapping like a snake around the branch. Wood cracked slightly as the rope pulled tight. However, the other end of the rope twisted in an odd pattern, writhing.

Vivenna watched, frowning, until she figured out what was happening. The rope was twisting around her hand, trying to hold it as well.

"Stop," Vivenna said.

Nothing happened. It continued to pull tight.

"Your Breath to mine," she Commanded.

The rope stopped twisting and her Breath returned. She shook the rope free. *All right,* she thought. *"Hold things" works, but it's not very specific. It will wrap around my fingers as well as the thing I want it to tie up. What if I tried something else?*

"Hold that branch," she Commanded. Again, Breath left her. More of it this time. Her trousers drained of color, and the rope end twisted, wrapping around the branch. The rest of it remained still.

She smiled in satisfaction. *So the more complicated the Command, the more Breath it requires.*

She took back her Breath. As Vasher had explained, doing so didn't shock her senses, for it was a mere restoration to a normal state for her. If she'd gone several days without that Breath, she'd have been overwhelmed by recovering its power. It was a little like taking a first bite of something very flavorful.

She eyed her clothes, which were now completely grey. Out of curiosity, she tried Awakening the rope again. Nothing happened. She picked up a stick, then Awakened the rope. It worked this time, the stick losing its color, though it took a *lot* more breath. Perhaps this was because the stick wasn't

very colorful. The tree trunk didn't work for color, though. Presumably, one couldn't draw color from something that was itself alive.

She discarded the branch and fetched a few of Vasher's colored handkerchiefs from the room. She walked back to the tree. *Now what?* she thought. Could she put the Breath into the rope now, then command it to hold something later? How would she even phrase that?

"Hold things that I tell you to hold," she Commanded.

Nothing happened.

"Hold that branch when I tell you."

Again, nothing.

"Hold whatever I say."

Nothing.

A voice came from behind. "Tell it to 'Hold when thrown.' "

Vivenna jumped, spinning. Vasher stood behind her, Nightblood held before him, point down. He had his pack over his shoulder.

Vivenna flushed, glancing back at the rope. "Hold when thrown," she said, using a handkerchief for color. Her Breath left her, but the rope remained limp. So she tossed it to the side, hitting one of the hanging tree branches.

The rope immediately twisted about, locking the branches together and holding them tightly.

"That's useful," Vivenna said.

Vasher raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps. Dangerous though."

"Why?"

"Get the rope back."

Vivenna paused, realizing that the rope had twisted around branches that were too high for her to reach. She hopped up, trying to grab it.

"I prefer to use a longer rope," Vasher said, raising Nightblood by the blade and using its hooked crossguard to pull the branches down. "If you always keep hold of one end, then you don't have to worry about it getting taken from you. Plus, you can Awaken when you need to, rather than leaving a bunch of Breath locked into a rope that you may or may not need."

Vivenna nodded, recovering her Breath from the rope.

"Come on," he said, walking back toward the room. "You've made enough of a spectacle for one day."

Vivenna followed, noticing that several people on the street had stopped to watch her. "How did they notice?" she asked. "I wasn't *that* obvious about what I was doing."

Vasher snorted. "And how many people in T'Telir walk around in grey clothing?"

Vivenna blushed as she followed Vasher into the cramped room. He set down his pack and then leaned Nightblood against one wall. Vivenna eyed the sword. She still wasn't certain what to make of the weapon. She felt a little nauseated every time she looked at it, and the memory of how violently sick she'd felt when touching it was still fresh.

Plus there had been that voice in her head. Had she really heard it? Vasher had been characteristically tight-lipped when she'd asked about it, rebuffing her questions.

"Aren't you an Idrian?" Vasher asked, drawing her attention as he settled down.

"Last I checked," she replied.

"You seem oddly fascinated with Awakening for a follower of Austre." He spoke with eyes closed as he rested his head against the door.

"I'm not a very good Idrian," she said, sitting down. "Not anymore. I might as well learn to use what I have."

Vasher nodded. "Good enough. I've never really understood why Austrism suddenly turned its back on Awakening."

"Suddenly?"

He nodded, eyes still closed. "Wasn't like that before the Manywar."

"Really?"

"Of course," he said.

He often spoke that way, mentioning things that seemed farfetched to her, yet saying them as if he knew exactly what he was talking about. No conjecture. No wavering. As if he knew everything. She could see why it was sometimes hard for him to get along with people.

"Anyway," Vasher said, opening his eyes. "Did you eat all of that squid?"

She nodded. "Is that what that was?"

"Yes," he said, opening his pack, getting out another dried chunk of meat. He held it up. "Want more?"

She felt sick. "No, thank you."

He paused, noticing the look in her eyes. "What? Did I give you a bad piece?"

She shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"It's nothing."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I said it's nothing." She glanced away. "I just don't care for fish very much."

"You don't?" he asked. "I've been feeding it to you for five days now."

She nodded silently.

"You ate it every time."

"I'm dependent upon you for food," she said. "I don't intend to complain about what you give me."

He frowned, then took a bite of squid and began chewing. He still wore his torn, almost-ragged clothing, but Vivenna had now been around him enough to know that he kept it clean. He obviously had the resources to get new clothing, yet he chose to wear the worn and tattered things instead. He also wore the same half-scrub, half-beard on his face. It never seemed to get longer, yet she never saw him trim it or shave it. How did he manage to keep it just the right length? Was that intentional, or was she reading too much into it?

"You aren't what I expected," he said.

"I would have been," she said. "A few weeks ago."

"I doubt it," he said, gnawing on his chunk of squid. "That tenacious spirit you've got doesn't come from a few weeks on the streets. Neither does that sense of martyrdom."

She met his eyes. "I want you to teach me more about Awakening."

He shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"I don't even know how to answer that," she said. "Denth taught me a few Commands, but that was the same day that you took me captive."

Vasher nodded. They sat silent for a few minutes.

"Well?" she finally asked. "Are you going to say anything?"

"I'm thinking," he said.

She raised an eyebrow.

He scowled. "Awakening is something I've done for a very, very long time. I always have trouble trying to explain it. Don't rush me."

"It's okay," she said. "Take your time."

He shot her a glance. "Don't patronize me either."

"I'm not patronizing; I'm being polite."

"Well next time, be polite with less condescension in your voice," he said.

Condescension? she thought. *I wasn't condescending!* She eyed him as he sat, chewing on his dried squid. The more time she spent with him, the less frightening she found him, but the more frustrating. *He is a dangerous man,* she reminded herself. *He has left corpses strewn all over the city, using that sword of his to make people slaughter each other.*

She'd considered running from him on several occasions, but had eventually decided that she'd be a fool to do so. She could find no fault in his efforts to stop the war, and his solemn promise in the basement that first day still stuck with her. She believed him. Hesitantly.

She just intended to keep her eyes open a little wider from now on.

"All right," he said. "I guess this is for the best. I'm getting tired of you walking around with that bright aura of yours that you can't even use."

"Well?"

"Well, I think we should start with theory," he said. "There are four kinds of BioChromatic entities. The first, and most spectacular, are the Returned. They're called gods here in Hallandren, but I'd rather call them Spontaneous Sentient BioChromatic Manifestations in a Deceased Host. What is odd about them is that they're the only naturally occurring BioChromatic entity, which is theoretically the explanation for why they can't use or bestow their BioChromatic Investiture. Of course, the fact is that *every* living being is born with a certain BioChromatic Investiture. This could also explain why Type Ones retain sentience."

Vivenna blinked. That wasn't what she had been expecting.

"You're more interested in Type Two and Type Three entities," Vasher continued. "Type Two being Mindless Manifestations in a Deceased Host. They are cheap to make, even with awkward Commands. This is per the Law of BioChromatic Parallelism: the closer a host is to a living shape and form, the easier it is to Awaken. BioChroma is the power of life, and so it seeks patterns of life. That, however, leads us to another law—the Law of Comparability. It states that the amount of Breath required to Awaken something isn't necessarily indicative of its power once Awakened. A piece of cloth cut into a square and a piece of cloth cut into the shape of a person will take very different

amounts of Breath to Awaken, but will be essentially the same once they have been Invested.

"The explanation for this is simple. Some people think of Awakening as pouring water into a cup. You pour until the cup is filled, and then the object comes to life. This is a false analogy. Instead, think of Awakening as beating down a door. You pound and pound, and some doors are easier to open than others, but once they're open, they do about the same thing."

He glanced at her. "Understand?"

"Uh . . ." she said. She'd spent her youth training with the tutors, but this was beyond even their methods of teaching. "It's a little dense."

"Well, do you want to learn or not?"

You asked me if I understood, she thought. *And I answered.* However, she didn't voice her objections. Better for him to keep talking.

"Type Two BioChromatic entities," he said, "are what people in Hallandren call Lifeless. They are different from Type One entities in several ways. Lifeless can be created at will, and require only a few Breaths to Awaken—anywhere between one and hundreds, depending on the Commands used—and they feed off of their own color when being Invested. They don't present an aura when Awakened, but the Breath sustains them, keeping them from needing to eat. They can die, and need a special alcohol solution to remain functional past a few years of Awakened status. Because of their organic host, their Breath clings to the body, and cannot be withdrawn once Invested."

"I know a little about them," Vivenna said, "Denth and his team have a Lifeless."

Vasher fell silent. "Yes," he finally said. "I know."

Vivenna frowned, noticing a strange look in his eyes. They sat silently for a few moments. "You were talking about Lifeless and their Commands?" she prompted.

Vasher nodded. "They need a Command to Awaken them, just like anything else. Even your religion teaches about Commands—it says that Austre is the one who Commands the Returned to come back."

She nodded.

"Understanding the theory of Commands is tough. Look at Lifeless, for instance. It's taken us centuries to discover the most efficient ways to bring a body to a Lifeless state. Even now, we're not sure if we understand how it

works. I guess *this* is the first thing I'd like to get across to you—that BioChroma is complicated, and we really don't understand most of it."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just what I said," Vasher replied, shrugging. "We don't really know what we're doing."

"But you sound so technical and precise in your descriptions."

"We've figured out some things," he said. "But Awakeners really haven't been around that long. The more you learn about BioChroma, the more you'll realize that there are more things that we *don't* know than there are things we do. Why are the specific Commands so important, and why do they have to be spoken in your native language? What brings Type One entities—Returned—back to life in the first place? Why are Lifeless so dull-minded, while Returned fully sentient?"

Vivenna nodded.

"Creating Type Three BioChromatic entities is what we traditionally call 'Awakening,' " Vasher continued. "That's when you create a BioChromatic manifestation in an organic host that is far removed from having been alive. Cloth works the best, though sticks, reeds, and other plant matter can be used."

"What about bones?" Vivenna asked.

"They're strange," Vasher said. "They take far more Breath to awaken than a body held together with flesh and aren't as flexible as something like cloth. Still, Breath will stick to them fairly easily, since they were once alive and maintain the form of a living thing."

"So Idrian stories that talk about skeletal armies *aren't* just fabrications?"

He chuckled. "Oh, they are. If you wanted to Awaken a skeleton, you'd have to arrange all the bones together in their correct places. That's a lot of work for something that will take upwards of fifty or a hundred Breaths to Awaken. Intact corpses make far more sense economically, even if the Breath sticks to them so well that it becomes impossible to recover. Still, I've seen some very interesting things done with skeletons which have been Awakened.

"Anyway, Type Three entities—regular Awakened objects—are different. BioChroma doesn't stick to them very well at all. The result is that they require quite a bit of Investiture—often well over a hundred Breaths—to

Awaken them. The benefit of this, of course, is that the Breath can be drawn back out again. This has allowed for quite a bit more experimentation, and that has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of Awakening techniques."

"You mean the Commands?" Vivenna asked.

"Right," Vasher said. "As you've seen, most basic Commands work easily. If the Command is something the object could do, and you state it in a simple way, the Command will usually work."

"I tried some simple Commands," she said. "On the rope. They didn't work."

"Those may have sounded simple, but they weren't. Simple Commands are only two words long. Grab something. Hold something. Move up. Move down. Twist around. Even some two-word Commands can be more complicated, and it takes practice visualizing—or, well, imagining. Well, using your mind to—"

"I understand that part," she said. "Like flexing a muscle."

He nodded. "The Command 'Protect me,' though only two words, is extremely complicated. So are others, like Fetch something. You have to give the right impulse to the object. This area is where you really begin to understand how little we know. There are probably thousands of Commands we don't know. The more words you add, the more complicated the mental component becomes, which is why discovering a new Command can take years of study."

"Like the discovery of a new Command to make Lifeless," she said thoughtfully. "Three hundred years ago, those who had the one-Breath Command could make their Lifeless much more cheaply than those who didn't. That disparity started the Manywar."

"Yes," Vasher said. "Or, at least, that was part of what caused the war. It's not really important. The thing to understand is that we're still children when it comes to Awakening. It doesn't help that a lot of people who learn new, valuable Commands never share them, and probably die with the knowledge."

Vivenna nodded, noticing how his lesson grew more relaxed and conversational as he got into the topic. His expertise surprised her.

He sits on the floor, she thought, *eating a dry piece of squid, not having shaven in weeks and wearing clothing that looks like it's about to fall off. Yet he talks like a scholar giving a lecture. He carries a sword that leaks black smoke*

and causes people to kill each other, yet he works so hard to stop a war. Who is this man?

She glanced to the side, to where Nightblood sat leaning against the wall. Perhaps it was the discussion of the technical aspects of BioChroma, or perhaps it was simply her growing suspicion. She was beginning to understand what wasn't right about the sword.

"What is a Type Four BioChromatic entity?" Vivenna asked, glancing back at Vasher.

He fell silent.

"Type One is a human body with sentience," Vivenna said. "Type Two is a human body without sentience. Type three is an Awakened object like a rope—an object with no sentience. Is there a way to create an Awakened object *with* sentience? Like a Returned, but inside of something other than a human body?"

Vasher stood. "We've covered enough for one day."

"You didn't answer my question."

"And I'm not going to," he said. "And I advise you never to ask it again. Understand?" He glanced at her, and she felt a chill at the harshness in his voice.

"All right," she said, though she didn't glance away.

He snorted to himself, then reached into his large pack, yanking something out. "Here," he said. "I brought you something."

He tossed a long, cloth-wrapped object to the floor. Vivenna stood, walking over to pull the cloth off. Inside was a thin, well-polished dueling blade.

"I don't know how to use one of these," she said.

"Then learn," he replied. "If you know how to fight, you'll be far less annoying to have around. I won't have to keep pulling you out of trouble all the time."

She flushed. "One time."

"It'll happen again," he said.

She hesitantly picked up the sheathed sword, surprised at how light it was.

"Let's go," Vasher said. "I've got another group for us to visit."

47

Lightsong tried not to think about his dreams. He tried not to think about T'Telir in flames. Of people dying. Of the world, essentially, ending.

He stood on the second story of his palace, looking over the Court of Gods. The second story was essentially a covered roof, open on all sides. Wind blew through his hair. The sun was close to setting. Already, torches were arrayed on the lawn. It was so perfect. The palaces set in a circle, lit by torches and lanterns matching the colors of the nearest building.

Some of the palaces were dark; the buildings that currently held no gods.

What would happen if too many others Returned before we killed ourselves? he thought idly. *Would they build more palaces?* As far as he knew, there had always been enough space.

At the head of the court sat the God King's palace, tall and black. It had obviously been built so that it would dominate even the extravagant mansions of the others, and it threw a wide, warped shadow across the back wall.

Perfect. So perfect. The torches were arranged in patterns he could only see by standing atop a building. The grass was kept manicured, and the massive wall tapestries were replaced often so that they showed no wear, stains, or fading.

The people put forth such effort for their gods. Why? Sometimes it baffled him. But what to think of other faiths, ones with no visible gods, only incorporeal imaginings or wishes? Surely those 'gods' did even less for their people than the Hallandren court, yet they still were worshipped.

Lightsong shook his head. Meeting with Allmother had reminded him of days he hadn't thought of in a long time. Calmseer. She had been his mentor when he'd first Returned. Blushweaver was jealous of his memories of her, but she didn't understand the truth. Nor could he, really, explain it. Calmseer had come closer to being a divinity than any Returned Lightsong had known. She'd cared for her followers much as Allmother now tried to do, but there had been genuine concern in Calmseer's regard. She hadn't helped the people because she feared that they would stop worshiping, and she had no arrogance of presumed superiority.

Real kindness. Real love. Real mercy.

Yet even Calmseer had felt inadequate. She had often said she felt guilty because she couldn't live up to what people expected. How could she? How could anyone? In the end, he suspected this was what drove her to answer a petition. There had only been one way, in her estimation, to be the goddess everyone demanded she be. And that was to give up her life.

They push us into it, Lightsong thought. *They craft all of this splendor and luxury, they give us whatever we desire, then they subtly poke at us. Be a god. Prophesy. Maintain our illusion for us.*

Die. Die so that we can keep believing.

He usually stayed off his roof. He preferred to be down below, where the limited perspective made it so much easier to ignore the larger view. So much easier to focus on simple things, like his life in the moment.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked quietly, approaching.

Lightsong didn't reply.

"Are you all right, Your Grace?"

"No man should be this important," Lightsong said.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked, walking up beside him.

"It does strange things to you. We weren't built for it."

"You're a god, Your Grace. You *were* built for it."

"No," he said. "I'm no god."

"Excuse me, but you don't really get to choose. We worship you, and that makes you our god." Llarimar spoke the words in his usual calm fashion. Didn't the man *ever* get upset?

"You're not helping."

"I apologize, Your Grace. But perhaps you should stop arguing about the same old things."

Lightsong shook his head. "This is something different today. I'm not sure what to do."

"You mean about Allmother's Commands?"

Lightsong nodded. "I thought I had it figured out, Scoot. I can't keep up with all of the things Blushweaver is plotting—I've never been good at details."

Llarimar didn't respond.

"I was going to give it up," Lightsong said. "Allmother was doing a fantastic job of standing up for herself. I figured that if I gave her my Commands, then *she'd* know what to do. She'd understand if it's better to support Blushweaver or oppose her."

"You could still just let her," Llarimar said. "You gave her your Commands too."

"I know," Lightsong said.

They fell silent.

So it comes down to this, he thought. *The first of us who changes those Commands takes control of all twenty thousand. The other will be locked out.*

What did he choose? Did he sit back and let history happen, or did he jump in and make a mess of it?

Whoever you are, he thought, *whatever is out there that sent me back, why couldn't you just let me be? I'd already lived one life. I'd already made my choices. Why did you have to send me back?*

He'd tried everything, and yet people still looked to him. He knew for a fact that he was one of the most popular Returned, visited by more petitioners and given more art than almost anyone else. *Honestly,* he thought. *What is wrong with these people?* Were they so in need of something to worship that they chose him rather than worry that their religion might be false?

Allmother claimed that some *did* think that. She worried about the perceived lack of faith among the common people. Lightsong wasn't certain he agreed with her. He knew of the theories—that the gods who lived the longest were the weak ones because the system encouraged the best to sacrifice themselves quickly. However, the same number of petitioners came to him now as when he first started. Plus, too few gods were chosen on a whole for that to be statistically valid.

Or was he just distracting himself with irrelevant details? He leaned on the railing, looking out over the green and its glowing pavilions.

This could be the crowning moment for him. He could finally prove

himself to be an indolent wastrel. It was perfect. If he did nothing, then Allmother would be forced to take up the armies and resist Blushweaver.

Was that what he wanted? Allmother kept herself isolated from the other gods. She didn't attend many court assemblies and didn't listen to the debates. Blushweaver was intimately involved. She knew every god and goddess well. She understood the issues, and she was very clever. Of all of the gods, only she had begun taking steps to secure their armies.

Siri is no threat, he thought. But if someone else were manipulating her? Would Allmother have the political savvy to understand the danger? Without his concerned guidance, would Blushweaver see that Siri wasn't crushed?

If he did walk away, there would be a cost. He would be to blame, for he'd given up.

"Who was she, Llarimar?" Lightsong asked quietly. "The young woman in my dreams. Was she my wife?"

The high priest didn't answer.

"I need to know," Lightsong said, turning. "This time, I *really* need to know."

"I . . ." Llarimar frowned, then looked away. "No," he said quietly. "She was not your wife."

"My lover?"

He shook his head.

"But she was important to me?"

"Very," Llarimar said.

"And is she still alive?"

Llarimar wavered, then finally nodded his head.

Still alive, Lightsong thought.

If this city fell, then she would be in danger. Everyone who worshiped Lightsong—everyone who counted on him despite his best efforts—would be in danger.

T'Telir couldn't fall. Even if there were war, the fighting wouldn't come here. Hallandren was not in danger. It was the most powerful kingdom in the world.

And what of his dreams?

He had been given only one real duty in the government. That of taking command of ten thousand Lifeless. Of deciding when they should be used. And when they should not be.

Still alive . . .

He turned and walked toward the steps.

THE LIFELESS ENCLAVE was technically part of the Court of Gods. The huge building was built at the base of the court plateau, and a long, covered walkway ran down to it.

Lightsong moved down the steps with his entourage. They passed several guard posts, though he wasn't sure why they needed guards in a hallway leading from the court. He had only visited the enclave a couple of times—primarily during his first few weeks as a Returned, when he had been required to give the security phrase to his ten thousand soldiers.

Perhaps I should have come more often, he thought. What would have been the point? Servants cared for the Lifeless, making certain their ichor-alcohol was fresh, that they exercised, and . . . did whatever else it was that Lifeless did.

Llarimar and several of the other priests were puffing from the long, brisk walk by the time they reached the bottom of the steps. Lightsong, of course, had no trouble, as he was in perfect physical condition. There were some things about godhood that never made him complain. A couple of guards opened the doors into the compound. It was gigantic, of course—it contained space for forty thousand Lifeless. There were four large warehouse-like storage areas for the different groups of Lifeless, a track for them to run around, a room filled with various stones and blocks of metal for them to lift to keep their muscles strong, and a medical area where their ichor-alcohol was tested and refreshed.

They passed through several twisting passages, designed to confuse invaders who might try to strike at the Lifeless, then approached a guard post set beside a large open doorway. Lightsong passed the living human guards and looked in at the Lifeless.

He'd forgotten that they kept them in the dark.

Llarimar waved for a couple of priests to hold up lamps. The door opened onto a viewing platform. The floor of the warehouse extended below, filled with line upon line of silent, waiting soldiers. They wore their armor and carried their weapons in sheaths.

"There are holes in the ranks," Lightsong said.

"Some of them will be exercising," Llarimar replied. "I have sent a servant to fetch them."

Lightsong nodded. The Lifeless stood with eyes open. They didn't shuffle or cough. Staring out over them, Lightsong suddenly remembered why he never felt any desire to return and inspect his troops. They were simply too unnerving.

"Everyone out," Lightsong said.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked. "Don't you want a few priests to stay?"

Lightsong shook his head. "No. I will bear this phrase myself."

Llarimar hesitated, but then nodded, doing as ordered.

In Lightsong's opinion, there was no good way of keeping Command phrases. Leaving them in the hands of a single god was to risk losing the phrase through assassination. However, the more people who knew the Command phrases, the more likely it was that the secret would be bribed or tortured out of someone.

The only mitigating factor was the God King. Apparently, with his powerful BioChroma, he could break Lifeless more quickly. Still, taking control of ten thousand would require weeks, even for the God King.

The choice was left to the individual Returned. They could let some of their priests hear the Command phrase so that if something happened to the god, the priests could pass the phrase on to the next Returned. If the god chose not to give the phrase to his priests, then he placed an even larger burden on himself. Lightsong had found that option silly, years before, and had included Llarimar and several others in the secret.

This time he saw wisdom in keeping the phrase to himself. Should he get the chance, he would whisper it to the God King. But only him. "Bottom line blue," he said. "I give you a new Command phrase." He paused. "Red panther. Red panther. Step to the right side of the room."

A group of the Lifeless near the front—those who could hear his voice—moved over to the side. Lightsong sighed, closing his eyes. A part of him had hoped that Allmother had come here first, that she had already changed the Command phrase.

But she hadn't. He opened his eyes then took the steps down to the warehouse floor. He spoke again, changing the phrase for another group. He could do about twenty or thirty at a time—he remembered the process taking hours the last time.

He continued. He would leave the Lifeless with their basic instructions to obey the servants when they asked the creatures to exercise or go to the infirmary. He'd give them a lesser Command that could be used to move them about and make them march to specific locations, as when they had been placed in ranks outside the city to greet Siri, and another to make them go with members of the city guard to provide extra muscle.

Yet there would only be one person with ultimate command of them. One person who could make them go to war. When he was done in this room, he would move on, taking utter command of Allmother's ten thousand as well.

He would draw both armies to him. And in doing so, he would take his place at the very heart of the fate of two kingdoms.

48

Susebron didn't leave in the mornings anymore.

Siri lay in the bed beside him, curled slightly, her skin against his. He slept peacefully, chest going up and down, the white bed sheets throwing out prismatic colors around him as they inevitably reacted to his presence. A few months back, who could have understood where she'd find herself? Not only married to the God King of Hallandren, but in love with him as well.

She still thought it amazing. He was the most important religious and secular figure in the whole of the Inner Sea area. He was the basis for worship of the Hallandren Iridescent Tones. He was a creature feared and hated by most people in Idris.

And he was dozing quietly at her side. A god of color and beauty, his body as perfectly sculpted as a statue. And what was Siri? Not perfect, of that she was sure. And yet, somehow, she'd brought to him something that he needed. A hint of spontaneity. A breath from the outside, untamed by his priests or his reputation.

She sighed, head resting on his chest. There would be a price to be paid for their enjoyment these last few nights. *We really are fools,* she thought idly. *We only have to avoid one thing: giving the priests a child. We're aiming ourselves straight toward disaster.*

She found it hard to berate herself too firmly. She suspected that her act wouldn't have fooled the priests for much longer. They would grow

suspicious, or at least frustrated, if she continued it without producing an heir. She could imagine them interfering if faced with more stalling.

Whatever she and Susebron did to change events, they would have to do it quickly.

He stirred beside her, and she twisted, looking at his face as he opened his eyes. He regarded her for a few minutes, stroking her hair. It was amazing how quickly they had become comfortable in their intimacy.

He reached for his writing board. *I love you.*

She smiled. It was always the first thing he wrote in the mornings. "And I love you," she said.

However, he continued, *we are probably in trouble, aren't we?*

"Yes."

How long? he asked. *Until it's obvious that you will bear a child, I mean?*

"I'm not sure," she said, frowning. "I don't have much experience with this, obviously. I know that some of the women back in Idris complained of not being able to have children as quickly as they wanted, so maybe it doesn't always happen immediately. I know other women who bore children almost exactly nine months after their wedding night."

Susebron looked thoughtful.

A year from now, I could be a mother, Siri thought. She found the concept daunting. Up until a short time ago, she hadn't really thought of herself as an adult. *Of course,* she thought, feeling a bit sick, *according to what we've been told, any children I bear the God King would be stillborn anyway.* Even if that was a lie, her child would be in danger. She still suspected that the priests would spirit it away, then replace it with a Returned. In all likelihood, Siri would then be made to disappear as well.

Bluefingers tried to warn me, she thought. *He spoke of danger, not only to Susebron, but to me.*

Susebron was writing. *I've made a decision,* he wrote.

Siri raised an eyebrow.

I want to try making myself known to the people, he wrote, *and the other gods. I want to take control of my kingdom for myself.*

"I thought we decided that would be too dangerous."

It will be, he wrote. *But I'm beginning to think that it is a risk we must take.*

"And your objections from before?" she asked. "You can't shout out the

truth, and your guards are likely to rush you away if you try something like escaping."

Yes, Susebron wrote, *but you have far fewer guards, and you* can *yell.*

Siri paused. "Yes," she said. "But would anyone believe me? What would they think if I just started screaming about how the God King is being held prisoner by his own priests?"

Susebron cocked his head.

"Trust me," she said. "They'd think that I was crazy."

What if you gained the confidence of the Returned you often speak about? he wrote. *Lightsong the Bold.*

Siri gave that some thought.

You could go to him, Susebron wrote. *Tell him the truth. Perhaps he will lead you to other Returned he thinks might listen. The priests will not be able to silence us all.*

Siri lay beside him for a moment, head still resting on his chest. "It sounds possible, Seb, but why not just run? My serving women are from Pahn Kahl now. Bluefingers has said that he will try to get us out, if I ask. We can flee to Idris."

If we flee, Hallandren troops will follow, Siri. We would not be safe in Idris.

"We could go somewhere else, then."

He shook his head. *Siri, I have been listening to the arguments in the court of judgment. There will soon be war between our kingdoms. If we run, we will be abandoning Idris to invasion.*

"The invasion will happen if we stay, too."

Not if I take control of my throne, Susebron wrote. *The people of Hallandren, even the gods, are obligated to obey me. There will be no war if they know I disapprove.* He erased, then continued, writing faster. *I have told the priests that I don't wish to go to war, and they appeared sympathetic. However, they have done nothing.*

"They are probably worried," Siri said. "If they let you start making policy, then you may begin to think that you don't need them."

They'd be right, he wrote, smiling. *I need to become the leader of my people, Siri. That is the only way to protect your beautiful hills and the family you love so much.*

Siri fell silent, offering no further objections. To do as he was saying would be to play their hand. Make a gamble for everything. If they failed, the priests

would undoubtedly figure out that Siri and Susebron were in communication. That would spell the end of their time alone together.

Susebron obviously noticed her concern. *It is dangerous, but it is the best option. Fleeing would be just as risky, and it would leave us in far worse circumstances. In Idris, we would be seen as the reason the Hallandren armies had come. Other countries would be even more dangerous.*

Siri slowly nodded. In another country, they'd have no money and would make perfect subjects for ransom. They'd escape the priests only to find themselves being held captive to be used against Hallandren. The Kingdom of Iridescence was still widely disliked because of the Manywar.

"We'd be taken captive, as you say," she acknowledged. "Plus, if we were in another country, I doubt we'd be able to get you a Breath every week. Without them, you'd die."

He looked hesitant.

"What?" she asked.

I would not die without Breath, he wrote. *But that is not an argument in favor of flight.*

"You mean the stories of Returned needing Breath to live are lies?" Siri asked incredulously.

Not at all, he wrote quickly. *We do need Breath—but you forget that I hold the wealth of Breath passed down for generations in my family. I heard my priests speak of this once. If it were necessary to move me, I could survive on the extra Breaths I hold. Those over and above the Breath that makes me Returned. My body would simply feed off those extra Breaths, absorbing one a week.*

Siri sat back thoughtfully. That seemed to imply something about Breath that she couldn't quite figure out. Unfortunately, she just didn't have the experience to sort through it.

"All right," she said. "So we *could* go into hiding if we needed to."

I said this was not an argument for fleeing, Susebron wrote. *My treasure of Breaths might keep me alive, but it would also make me a very valuable target. Everyone will want those Breaths—even if I weren't the God King, I would be in danger.*

That was very true. Siri nodded. "All right," she said. "If we're really going to try exposing what the priests have done, I think we make our move soon. If I display any signs of being pregnant, I bet it will take the priests all of two heartbeats to sequester me."

Susebron nodded. *There will be a general assembly of the court in a couple of days. I have heard my priests say that this will be an important meeting—it is rare that the gods are all called together to vote. That meeting will decide whether or not we march on Idris.*

Siri nodded nervously. "I could sit with Lightsong," she said, "and plead for his help. If we go to several of the other gods, perhaps they—in front of the crowds—can demand to know whether or not I am lying."

And I will open my mouth and reveal that I have no tongue, he wrote. *Then let us see what the priests do. They will be forced to bow to the will of their own pantheon.*

Siri nodded. "All right," she said. "Let's try it."

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Vasher found her practicing again.

He hovered outside the window, lowered down from the roof via an Awakened rope which gripped him about the waist. Inside, Vivenna repeatedly Awakened a strip of cloth, unaware of Vasher. She Commanded the cloth to wiggle across the room, wrap around a cup, then bring that cup back without spilling.

She's learning so quickly, he thought. The Commands themselves were simple to say, but providing the right mental impulse was difficult. It was like learning to control a second body. Vivenna was quick. Yes, she had a lot of Breath. That made it easier, but true Instinctive Awakening—the ability to Awaken objects without training or practice—was a gift granted only by the Sixth Heightening. That was one step beyond even what Returned had, with their single deific Breath. Vivenna was far from that stage. She learned faster than she should have, even if he knew she was frustrated by how often she got things wrong.

Even as he watched, she made a mistake. The cloth wiggled across the room, but climbed into the cup instead of wrapping around it. It shook, making the cup fall over, then the rope finally returned, leaving a soggy trail. Vivenna cursed and walked over to refill the cup. She never noticed Vasher hanging just outside. He wasn't surprised—he was currently a Drab, his excess Breath stored in his shirt.

She replaced the cup, and he pulled himself up as she walked back. Of

course, the mechanics of how he moved about with the ropes were far more complicated than they seemed. His Command incorporated making the rope respond to taps of his finger along its length. Awakening was different from creating a Lifeless—Lifeless had brains and could interpret Commands and requests. The rope had none of that; it could only act on its original instructions.

With a few taps, he lowered himself again, Vivenna faced away from him as she picked up another colored swatch to use as fuel when she Awakened her cup-fetching ribbon.

I like her, Nightblood said. *I'm glad we didn't kill her.*

Vasher didn't respond.

She's very pretty, don't you think? Nightblood asked.

You can't tell, Vasher replied.

I can tell, Nightblood said. *I've decided that I can.*

Vasher shook his head. Pretty or not, the woman should never have come to Hallandren. She'd given Denth a perfect tool. *Of course,* he admitted wryly, *Denth probably didn't need that tool.* Hallandren and Idris were close to snapping. Vasher had stayed away too long. He knew that. He also knew that there was no way he would have come back earlier.

Inside the room, Vivenna successfully managed to get the cloth to bring her cup, and she drank from it with a satisfied look that Vasher could just barely see from the side. He had the rope lower him to the ground. He ordered it to let go up above, then—once it had twisted down around his arm—he recovered his Breath and climbed the external steps to the room.

Vivenna turned as Vasher entered. She set down the cup, hurriedly stuffing the cloth in her pocket. *What does it matter if he sees me practicing?* she thought, flushing. *It's not like I have anything to hide.* But practicing before him was embarrassing. He was so stern, so unforgiving of faults. She didn't like him to see her fail.

Well?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Both the house you were using and the safe house in the slums are empty," he said. "Denth is too clever to get caught like that. He must have figured that you would reveal his location."

Vivenna ground her teeth in frustration, settling back against the wall. Like the other rooms they had stayed in, this one was utterly simple. Their only possessions were a pair of bedrolls and their changes of clothing, all of which Vasher carried about in his duffel.

Denth lived far more luxuriously. He could afford to—he now held all of Lemex's money. *Clever bit, that,* she thought. *Giving me the money, making me feel like I was in charge. He knew all along that the gold was never out of his hands, just as I never was.*

"I was hoping we'd be able to watch him," she said. "Maybe get a jump on what he's planning next."

Vasher shrugged. "Didn't work. No use crying about it. Come on. I think I can get us in to meet with some of the Idrian workers at one of the orchards, assuming we arrive during the lunch break."

Vivenna frowned as he turned to go. "Vasher," she said. "We can't keep doing this."

"This?"

"When I was with Denth, we met with crime lords and politicians. You and I are meeting with peasants on corners and in fields."

"They're good people!"

"I know they are," Vivenna said quickly. "But, do you really think we're making a difference? Compared to what Denth is probably doing, I mean?"

He frowned, but instead of arguing with her, he just pounded his fist against the side of the wall. "I know," he said. "I've tried other leads, but most everything I do seems a step behind Denth. I can kill his gangs of thieves, but he has more of them than I can find. I've tried to figure out who is behind the war—even followed leads in the Court of Gods itself—but everyone is growing more and more tight-lipped. They assume the war to be inevitable, now, and don't want to be seen as being on the losing side of the argument."

"What about priests?" Vivenna said. "Aren't they the ones who bring things to the attention of the gods? If we can get more of them to argue against the war, then maybe we can stop it."

"Priests are fickle," Vasher said with a shake of his head. "Most of those who argued against the war have caved in. Even Nanrovah switched sides on me."

"Nanrovah?"

"High priest of Stillmark," Vasher said. "I thought he was solid—he even met with me a few times to talk about his opposition of the war. Now he refuses to see me anymore and has switched sides. Colorless liar."

Vivenna frowned. *Nanrovah . . .* "Vasher," she said. "We did something to him."

"What?"

"Denth and his team," Vivenna said. "We helped a gang of thieves rob from a salt peddler. We used a couple of distractions to cover the burglary. We set a fire in a nearby building and overturned a carriage that was passing through the garden. The carriage belonged to a high priest. I think his name was Nanrovah."

Vasher cursed quietly.

"You think it might be connected?" she asked.

"Maybe. You know which thieves were actually doing the robbery?"

She shook her head.

"I'll be back," he said. "Wait here."

So she did. She waited for hours. She tried practicing her Awakening, but she'd already spent most of the day working on that. She was mentally exhausted and found it difficult to concentrate. Eventually, she found herself staring out the window in annoyance. Denth had always let her go along on his information gathering forays.

That was just because he wanted to keep me close, she thought. Now that she looked back, there were obviously lots of things Denth had been hiding from her. Vasher just didn't care to placate her.

He wasn't stingy with information, though, when she asked. His answers were grumpy, but he did usually answer. She still mulled over their conversation about Awakening. Less because of what he'd said. More because of the way he'd said it.

She'd been wrong about him. She was almost certain of that now. She had to stop judging people. But was that possible? Wasn't interaction based, in part, on judgments? A person's background and attitudes influenced how she responded to them.

The answer, then, wasn't to stop judging. It was to hold those judgments as mutable. She'd judged Denth to be a friend, but she shouldn't have ignored the way he talked about mercenaries having no friends.

The door slammed open. Vivenna jumped, putting a hand to her chest.

Vasher walked in. "Start reaching for that sword when you're startled," he said. "There's little reason to grab your shirt, unless you're planning to rip it off."

Vivenna flushed, hair twinging red. The sword he had bought her lay on the side of the room; they hadn't had much opportunity to practice, and she still barely even knew how to hold the thing properly. "Well?" she asked as he closed the door. It was already dark outside, and the city was beginning to sparkle with lights.

"The robbery was a cover," Vasher said. "The real hit was that carriage. Denth promised the thieves something valuable if they committed a robbery and started a fire, both as distractions to get at the carriage."

"Why?" Vivenna asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Coins?" Vivenna asked. "When Tonk Fah hit the horse, it knocked a chest off the top. It was filled with gold."

"What happened then?" Vasher asked.

"I left with some others. I thought the carriage itself was the distraction, and once it went down, I was supposed to pull out."

"Denth?"

"He wasn't there, come to think of it," Vivenna said. "The others told me he was working with the thieves."

Vasher nodded, walking over to his pack. He threw aside the bedrolls then took out several articles of clothing. He pulled off his shirt, exposing a well-muscled—and rather hairy—torso. Vivenna blinked in surprise, then blushed. She probably should have turned aside, but the curious part of her was too strong. What was he doing?

He didn't remove his trousers, thankfully, but instead threw on a different shirt. The sleeves of this one were cut into long ribbons near the wrists.

"Upon call," he said, "become my fingers and grip that which I must."

The cuff tassels wiggled.

"Wait," Vivenna said. "What was that? A Command?"

"Too complicated for you," he said, kneeling and undoing the cuff of

his trousers. She could see that here, too, there were extra lengths of cloth. "Become as my legs and give them strength," he Commanded.

The leg-tassels crossed under his feet, growing tight. Vivenna didn't argue with his insistence that the Commands were "too complicated." She just memorized them anyway.

Finally, Vasher threw on his tattered cloak, which was ripped in places. "Protect me," he Commanded, and she could see a lot of his remaining Breath drain into the cloak. He wrapped his rope belt around his waist—it was thin, for a rope, but strong, and she knew its purpose was not to keep his trousers up.

Finally, he picked up Nightblood. "You coming?"

"Where?"

"We're going to go capture a few of those thieves. Ask them exactly what Denth wanted with that carriage."

Vivenna felt a stab of fear. "Why invite me? Won't I just make it harder for you?"

"Depends," he said. "If we get into a fight, and you get in the way, then it will be more difficult. If we get into a fight and half of them attack you instead of me, it will make things easier."

"Assuming you don't defend me."

"That's a good assumption," he said, looking into her eyes. "If you want to come, come. But don't expect me to protect you, and—whatever you do—don't try and follow on your own."

"I wouldn't do such a thing," she said.

He shrugged. "I thought I'd make the offer. You're no prisoner here, Princess. You can do whatever you want. Just don't get in my way when you do it, understand?"

"I understand," she said, feeling a chill as she made her decision. "And I'm coming."

He didn't try to dissuade her. He simply pointed at her sword. "Keep that on."

She nodded, tying it on.

"Draw it," he said.

She did so, and he corrected her grip.

"What good will holding it properly do?" she asked. "I still don't know how to use it."

"Look threatening and it might make someone attacking you pause. Make them hesitate for a couple seconds in a fight, and that could mean a lot."

She nodded nervously, sliding the weapon back in its sheath. Then she grabbed several lengths of rope. "Hold when thrown," she said to the smaller one, then stuffed it into her pocket.

Vasher eyed her.

"Better to lose the Breath than get killed," she said.

"Few Awakeners agree with you," he noted. "To most of them, the thought of losing Breath is far more frightening than the prospect of death."

"Well, I'm not like most Awakeners," she said. "Half of me still finds the process blasphemous."

He nodded. "Put the rest of your Breath somewhere else," he said, opening the door. "We can't afford to draw attention."

She grimaced, then did as told, putting her Breath into her shirt with a basic, and non-active, Command. It was actually the same as giving a half-spoken Command, or one that was mumbled. Those would draw out the Breath, but leave the item unable to act.

As soon as she placed the Breath, the dullness returned. Everything seemed dead around her.

"Let's go," Vasher said, moving out into the darkness.

Night in T'Telir was very different from her homeland. There, it had been possible to see so many stars overhead that it looked like a bucket of white sand had been dashed into the air. Here, there were street lamps, taverns, restaurants, and houses of entertainment. The result was a city full of lights—a little like the stars themselves had come down to inspect grand T'Telir. And yet, Vivenna was still saddened by how few real stars she saw in the sky.

None of that meant that the places they were going were by any means bright. Vasher led her through the streets, and he quickly became little more than a hulking shadow. They left behind places with street lights, and even lit windows, moving into an unfamiliar slum. This was one of those she'd been afraid to enter, even when she lived on the streets. The night seemed to grow even darker as they entered and walked down one of the twisting, dark alleys that passed for streets in such places. They remained silent. Vivenna knew not to speak and draw attention.

Eventually, Vasher pulled to a stop. He pointed toward a building: single-story, flat-topped, and wide. It sat alone, in a depression, shanties built from

refuse covering the low hill behind it. Vasher waved for her to stay back, then quietly put the rest of his Breath into his rope and crept forward up the hill.

Vivenna waited, nervous, kneeling beside a decaying shanty that appeared to have been built from half-crumbling bricks. *Why did I come?* she thought. *He didn't tell me to—he simply said that I could. I could just as easily have stayed behind.*

But she was tired of things happening *to* her. She had been the one to point out that maybe there was a connection between the priest and Denth's plan. She wanted to see this to the end. Do something.

That had been easy to think back in the lit room. It didn't help her nerves that, looming to the left side of the shanty was one of the D'Denir statues. There had been some of them in the Highland slums as well, though most of those had been defaced or broken.

She couldn't feel anything with her life sense. She felt almost as if she'd been blinded. The Breath's absence brought memories of nights sleeping in the mud of a cold alleyway. Beatings administered by urchins half her size but with twice her competence. Hunger. Terrible, omnipresent, depressing, and draining hunger.

A footstep cracked and a shadow loomed. She nearly gasped in shock, but managed to keep it in as she recognized Nightblood in the figure's hand.

"Two guards," Vasher said. "Both silenced."

"Will they do for answering our questions?"

Vasher shook a silhouetted head. "Practically kids. We need someone more important. We'll have to go in. Either that, or sit and watch for a few days to determine who is in charge, then grab him when he's alone."

"That would take too long," Vivenna whispered.

"I agree," he said. "I can't use the sword, though. When Nightblood is done with a group, there's never anyone to question."

Vivenna shivered.

"Come on," he whispered. She followed as quietly as she could, moving for the front door. Vasher grabbed her arm and shook his head. She followed him around to the side, barely noticing the two lumps of unconscious bodies rolled into a ditch. At the back of the building, Vasher began to feel around on the ground. After a few moments without success, he cursed quietly and pulled something from his pocket. A handful of straw.

In just a few seconds, he had constructed three little men from the straw

and some thread, then used Breath reclaimed from his cloak to animate them. He gave each one the same command: "Find tunnels."

Vivenna watched with fascination. *That's far more abstract a Command than he led me to believe was possible,* she thought as the little men scuttled around on the ground. Vasher himself returned to his searching. *Apparently experience—and ability to use mental images—is the most important aspect of Awakening.*

He's been doing this a long time, and the way he spoke before—like a scholar—indicates he's studied Awakening very seriously.

One of the straw men began to jump up and down. The other two rushed over to it and then they began to bounce as well. Vasher joined them, as did Vivenna, and she watched as he uncovered a trapdoor hidden beneath a thick layer of dirt. He raised it a tad, then reached underneath. His hand came back out with several small bells, which had apparently been rigged there to ring if the door were opened all the way.

"No group like this has a hideout without bolt-holes," Vasher said. "Usually a couple of them. Always trapped."

Vivenna watched as he recovered the Breath from the straw men, quietly thanking each one. She frowned at the curious words. They were just piles of straw. Why thank them?

He put the Breath back into his cloak with a protection Command, then led the way down through the trapdoor. Vivenna followed, stepping softly, skipping a particular step when Vasher indicated. The bottom was a roughly cut tunnel—or, so she got from feeling along the sides of the lightless earthen chamber.

Vasher moved forward; she could only tell because of the quiet rustling of his clothing. She followed and was curious to see light ahead. She could also hear voices. Men talking, and laughing.

Soon she could see Vasher's silhouette; she moved up next to him, peeking out of their tunnel and into an earthen room. There was a fire burning at the center, the smoke twisting up through a hole in the ceiling. The upper chamber—the building itself—was probably just a front, for the chamber down here looked very lived-in. There were piles of cloth, bed rolls, pots and pans. All of it as dirty as the men who sat around the fire, laughing.

Vasher gestured to the side. There was another tunnel a few feet to the side of the one they were hiding in. Vivenna's heart jumped in shock as

Vasher crept into the room and toward the second tunnel. She glanced at the fire. The men were very focused on their drinking, and were blinded by the light. They didn't seem to notice Vasher.

She took a deep breath, then followed into the shadows of the large room, feeling exposed with the firelight to her back. Vasher didn't go far, however, before stopping. Vivenna nearly collided with him. He stood there for a few moments; finally, Vivenna poked him in the back, trying to get him to move aside so that she could see what he was doing. He shuffled, letting her see what was before him.

This tunnel ended abruptly—apparently, it wasn't so much a tunnel as a nook. Nestled against the back of the nook was a cage, about as high as Vivenna's waist. Inside the cage was a child.

Vivenna gasped softly, pushing past Vasher and kneeling down beside the cage. *The valuable thing in the carriage,* she thought, making the connection. *It wasn't the coins. It was the priest's daughter. The perfect bargaining chip if you wanted to blackmail someone into changing their position at court.*

As Vivenna knelt, the girl pulled back in the cage, sniffling quietly and quivering. The cage stank of human waste, and the child was covered in grime—all except for lines on her cheeks, which had been streaked clean by tears.

Vivenna looked up at Vasher. His eyes were shadowed, his back to the fire, but she could see him gritting his teeth. She could see tension in his muscles. He turned his head to the side, half-illuminating his face with the light of the red fire.

In that single lit eye, Vivenna saw fury.

"Hey!" one of the thieves called.

"Get the child out," Vasher said in a harsh whisper.

"How did you get here!" another man yelled.

Vasher met her eyes with his single illuminated one, and she felt herself shrink before him. She nodded, and Vasher turned away from her, one hand clenching into a fist, the other grabbing Nightblood in a hard-knuckled grip. He stepped slowly, deliberately, as he approached the men, his cloak rustling. Vivenna intended to do as asked, but she found it hard too look away from him.

The men drew blades. Vasher moved suddenly.

Nightblood, still sheathed, took one man in the chest, and Vivenna heard

bones snap. Another man attacked, and Vasher spun, whipping out a hand. The tassels on his sleeve moved on their own, wrapping around the blade of the thief's sword, catching it. Vasher's momentum ripped the blade free, and he tossed it aside, the tassels releasing it.

The sword hit the dirt of the cellar floor; Vasher's hand snapped up, grabbing the thief's face. The tassels wrapped around the man's head like a squid's tentacles. Vasher slammed the man backward and down into the ground—kneeling as he did to add momentum—even as he rammed the sheathed Nightblood into another man's legs, dropping him. A third tried to cut Vasher from behind, and Vivenna cried a warning. Vasher's cloak, however, suddenly whipped out—moving on its own—and grabbed the surprised man by the arms.

Vasher turned, anger in his face, and swung Nightblood toward the entangled man. Vivenna cringed at the sound of the cracking bones, and she turned away from the fight as the screaming continued. With shaking fingers, she tried to open the cage.

It was locked, of course. She drew out some Breath from a rope, then tried to Awaken the lock, but nothing happened.

Metal, she thought. *Of course. It hasn't been alive, so it can't be Awakened.*

Instead she pulled a thread free from her shirt, trying to ignore the cries of pain from behind. Vasher began to bellow as he fought, losing any semblance of being a cold, professional killer. This was a man enraged.

She raised the thread.

"Unlock things," she Commanded.

The thread wiggled a bit, but when she stuck it into the lock, nothing happened.

She withdrew the Breath, took a few calming breaths of her own, then closed her eyes.

Have to get the intention right. Need it to go inside, twist the tumbler free.

"Twist things," she said, feeling the Breath leave her. She stuck the thread into the lock. It spun about, and she heard a click. The door opened. The sounds of fighting from behind stopped, though men continued to moan.

Vivenna recovered her Breath then reached into the cage. The girl cringed, crying out and hiding her face.

"I'm a friend," Vivenna said soothingly. "Please, I'm here to help you."

But the girl wiggled, screaming when touched. Frustrated, Vivenna turned back toward Vasher.

He stood beside the fire, head bowed, bodies strewn around him. He held Nightblood in one hand, sheathed tip resting back against the dirty floor. And, for some reason, he seemed *larger* than he had a few moments ago. Taller. Broader of shoulders. More threatening.

Vasher's other hand was on Nightblood's hilt. The sheath clasp was undone, and black smoke crept out, off of the blade, some pouring toward the ground, some floating up toward the ceiling. As if it couldn't decide.

Vasher's arm was quivering.

Draw . . . me . . . a distant voice seemed to say in Vivenna's head. *Kill them . . .*

Many of the men still twitched on the ground. Vasher began to slide the blade free. It was dark black, and it seemed to suck in the firelight.

This isn't good, she thought. "Vasher!" she yelled. "Vasher, the girl won't come to me!"

He froze, then glanced at her, eyes glazed over.

"You defeated them, Vasher. No need to draw the sword."

Yes . . . yes there is . . .

He blinked, then saw her. He snapped Nightblood back into place, shaking his head and rushing toward her. He kicked a body as he passed, earning a grunt.

"Colorless monsters," he whispered, looking into the cage. He no longer seemed larger, and she decided that what she'd seen must have just been a trick of the light. He reached into the cage, holding out his hands. And, oddly, the child immediately went to him, grabbing his chest and weeping. Vivenna watched with shock. Vasher picked the child up, tears in his own eyes.

"You know her?" Vivenna asked.

He shook his head. "I've met Nanrovah, and knew he had young children, but I never met any of them."

"Then how? Why did she come to *you*?"

He didn't answer. "Come on," he said. "I attacked the ones who came running down when they heard screams. But more might return."

He looked like he almost wished that would happen. He turned toward the exit tunnel, and Vivenna followed.

THEY IMMEDIATELY MOVED toward one of the rich neighborhoods of T'Telir. Vasher didn't say much as they walked, and the girl was even more unresponsive. Vivenna worried for the child's mind. She had obviously had a rough couple of months.

They passed from shanties, to tenements, to decent homes on tree-lined streets with burning lanterns. As they reached the mansions, Vasher paused on the street, setting the girl down. "Child," he said. "I'm going to say some words to you. I want you to repeat them. Repeat them, and *mean* them."

The girl regarded him absently, nodding slightly.

He glanced at Vivenna. "Back away."

She opened her mouth to object, but thought better of it. She stepped back out of earshot. Fortunately, Vasher was near a lit streetlamp, so she could see him well. He spoke to the little girl, and she spoke back to him.

After opening the cage, Vivenna had taken the Breath back from the thread. She hadn't stowed it somewhere else. And, with the extra awareness she had, she thought she saw something. The girl's BioChromatic aura—the normal one that all people had—flickered just slightly.

It was faint. Yet with the First Heightening, Vivenna could have sworn she saw it.

But Denth told me it was all or nothing, she thought. *You have to give away all the Breath you hold. And you certainly can't give away* part *of a breath.*

Denth, it had been proven in other instances, was also a liar.

Vasher stood, the girl climbing back into his arms. Vivenna walked up and was surprised to hear the girl talking. "Where's Daddy?" she asked.

Vasher didn't reply.

"I'm dirty," the girl said, looking down. "Mommy doesn't like it when I get dirty. The dress is dirty too."

Vasher began walking. Vivenna hurriedly caught up.

"Are we going home?" the girl asked. "Where have we been? It's late, and I shouldn't be out. Who's that woman?"

She doesn't remember, Vivenna realized. *Doesn't remember where she's been . . . probably doesn't remember anything of the entire experience.*

Vivenna looked again at Vasher, walking with his ragged beard, eyes

forward, child in one arm, Nightblood in the other. He walked right up to a mansion's gates then kicked them open. He moved onto the mansion grounds, and Vivenna following more nervously.

A pair of guard dogs began barking. They howled and growled, getting closer. Vivenna cringed. Yet, as soon as they saw Vasher, they grew quiet, then trailed along happily, one hopping up and trying to lick his hands.

What in the name of the Colors is going on?

Some people were gathering at the front of the mansion, holding lanterns, trying to see what had caused the barking. One saw Vasher, said something to the others, then disappeared back inside. By the time Vivenna and Vasher had reached the front patio, a man had appeared at the front doors. He wore a white nightgown and was guarded by a couple of soldiers. They stepped forward to block Vasher, but the man in the nightgown rushed between them, crying out. He wept as he took the child from Vasher's arms.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Vivenna stood quietly, staying back. The dogs continued to lick Vasher's hands, though they noticeably avoided Nightblood.

The man clutched his child before finally surrendering her to a woman who had just arrived—the child's mother, Vivenna assumed. The woman exclaimed in joy, taking the girl.

"Why have you returned her?" the man said, looking at Vasher.

"Those who took her have been punished," Vasher said in his quiet, gruff voice. "That's all that should matter to you right now."

The man squinted. "Do I know you, stranger?"

"We've met," Vasher said. "I asked you to argue against the war."

"That's right!" the man said. "You didn't need to encourage me. But when they took Misel away from me . . . I had to stay quiet about what had happened, had to change my arguments, or they said they'd kill her."

Vasher turned away, moving to walk back down the path. "Take your child, keep her safe." He paused, turning back. "And make certain this kingdom doesn't use its Lifeless for a slaughter."

The man nodded, still weeping. "Yes, yes. Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much."

Vasher continued walking. Vivenna rushed after him, eyeing the dogs. "How did you make them stop barking?"

He didn't respond.

She glanced back at the mansion.

"You have redeemed yourself," he said quietly, passing the dark gates.

"What?"

"Kidnapping that girl is something Denth would have done, even if you hadn't come to T'Telir," Vasher said. "I would never have found her. Denth worked with too many different groups of thieves, and I thought that burglary was simply intended to disrupt supplies. Like everyone else, I ignored the carriage."

He stopped then looked at Vivenna in the darkness. "You saved that girl's life."

"By happenstance," she said. She couldn't see her hair in the dark, but she could feel it going red.

"Regardless."

Vivenna smiled, the compliment affecting her—for some reason—far more than it should have. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," he said. "Back in that lair. A warrior is supposed to be calm. When you duel or fight, you can't let anger control you. That's why I've never been that good a duelist."

"You did the job," she said, "and Denth has lost another pawn." They moved out onto the street. "Though," she added, "I wish I hadn't seen that lavish mansion. Doesn't raise my opinion of the Hallandren priests."

Vasher shook his head. "Nanrovah's father was one of the wealthiest merchants in the city. The son dedicated himself to serving the gods out of gratitude for their blessings. He takes no pay for his service."

Vivenna paused. "Oh."

Vasher shrugged in the darkness. "Priests are always easy to blame. They make convenient scapegoats—after all, anyone with a strong faith different from your own must either be a crazy zealot or a lying manipulator."

Vivenna flushed yet again.

Vasher stopped in the street, then turned to her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to say it that way." He cursed, turning and walking again. "I told you I'm no good at this."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm getting used to it."

He nodded in the darkness, seeming distracted.

He is a good man, she thought. *Or, at least, an earnest man trying to be good.* A part of her felt foolish for making yet another judgment.

Yet she knew she couldn't live—couldn't interact—without making some judgments. So she judged Vasher. Not as she'd judged Denth, who had said amusing things and given her what she'd expected to see. She judged Vasher by what she had seen him do. Cry when he saw a child being held captive. Return that child to her father, his only reward an opportunity to make a rough plea for peace. Living with barely any money, dedicating himself to preventing a war.

He was rough. He was brutal. He had a terrible temper. But he was a good man. And, walking beside him, she felt safe for the first time in weeks.

50

"And so we each have twenty thousand," Blushweaver said, walking beside Lightsong on the stone pathway that led in a circle around the arena.

"Yes," Lightsong said.

Their priests, attendants, and servants followed in a holy herd, though the two gods had refused palanquin or parasol. They walked alone, side by side. Lightsong in gold and red. Blushweaver, for once, wearing a gown that actually covered her.

Amazing, how good she looks in something like that, he found himself thinking, *when she takes the time to respect herself.* He wasn't certain what made him dislike her revealing outfits. Maybe he'd been a prude in his former life.

Or maybe he simply was one now. He smiled ruefully to himself. *How much can I really blame on my "old" self? That man is dead. He wasn't the one who got himself involved in the kingdom's politics.*

The arena was filling, and—in a rare show—all of the gods would be in attendance. Only Weatherlove was late, but he was often unpredictable.

Important events are imminent, Lightsong thought. *They have been building for years now. Why should I be at the center of them?*

His dreams the night before had been so odd. Finally, no visions of war. Just the moon. And some odd twisting passages. Like . . . tunnels.

Many of the gods nodded in respect as he passed their pavilions—though, admittedly, some scowled at him, and a few just ignored him. *What*

a strange system of rule, he thought. *Immortals who only last a decade or two—and who have never seen the outside world. And yet the people trust us.*

The people trust us.

"I think we should share the Command phrases with each other, Lightsong," Blushweaver said. "So that we each have all four, just in case."

He didn't say anything.

She turned away from him, looking at the people in their colorful clothing, clogging the benches and seats. "My, my," Blushweaver said, "quite the crowd. And so few of them paying attention to me. Quite rude of them, wouldn't you say?"

Lightsong shrugged.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "Perhaps they're just . . . what was it? Stunned, dazzled, and dumbfounded?"

Lightsong smiled faintly, remembering their conversation a few months back. The day this all had started. Blushweaver looked at him, a longing in her eyes.

"Indeed," Lightsong said. "Or, perhaps, they're really just ignoring you. In order to compliment you."

Blushweaver smiled. "And how, exactly, does ignoring me make a compliment?

"It provokes you to be indignant," Lightsong said. "And we all know that is when you are in best form."

"You like my form, then?"

"It has its uses. Unfortunately, I cannot compliment you by ignoring you as the others do. You see, only truly, *sincerely* ignoring you would provide the intended compliment. I am, actually, helpless and unable to ignore you. I do apologize."

"I see," Blushweaver said. "I'm flattered. I think. Yet you seem very good at ignoring *some* things. Your own divinity. General good manners. My feminine wiles."

"You're hardly wily, my dear," Lightsong said. "A wily man is one who fights with a small, carefully hidden dagger in reserve. You are more like a man who crushes his opponent with a stone block. Regardless, I do have another method of dealing with you, one that you shall likely find quite flattering."

"Somehow I find myself doubting."

"You should have more faith in me," he said with a suave wave of the hand.

"I am, after all, a god. In my divine wisdom, I have realized that the only way to truly compliment one such as you—Blushweaver—is to be far more attractive, intelligent, and interesting than you."

She snorted. "Well, then, I feel rather insulted by *your* presence."

"Touché," Lightsong said.

"And are you going to explain *why* you consider competing with me to be the most sincere form of compliment?"

"Of course I am," Lightsong said. "My dear, have you ever known me to make an inflammatorily ridiculous statement without providing an equally ridiculous explanation to substantiate it?"

"Of course not," she agreed. "You are nothing if not exhaustive in your self-congratulatory made-up logic."

"I am rather exceptional in that regard."

"Undoubtedly."

"Anyway," Lightsong said, holding up a finger, "by being far more stunning than you are, I invite people to ignore you and pay attention to me. That, in turn, invites *you* to be your usual charming self—throwing little tantrums and being overly seductive—to draw their attention back to you. And that, as I explained, is when you are most majestic. Therefore, the only way to make certain you receive the attention you deserve is to draw it all away from you. It's really *quite* difficult. I hope you appreciate all the work I do to be so wonderful."

"Let me assure you," she said, "I do appreciate it. In fact, I appreciate it so very much that I would like to give you a break. You can back off. I will bear the awful burden of being the most wonderful of the gods."

"I couldn't possibly let you."

"But if you are *too* wonderful, my dear, you will completely destroy your image."

"That image is getting tiresome anyway," Lightsong said. "I've long sought to be the most notoriously laziest of the gods, but I'm realizing more and more that the task is beyond me. The others are all naturally so much more delightfully useless than I am. They just pretend not to be aware of it."

"Lightsong!" she said. "One could say you begin to sound jealous!"

"One could also say that my feet smell like guava fruit," he said. "Just because one *could* say it doesn't mean it's relevant."

She laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"Really? I thought I was in T'Telir. When did we move?"

She held up a finger. "That pun was a stretch."

"Perhaps it was just a feint."

"A feint?"

"Yes, an intentionally weak joke to distract from the *real* one."

"Which is?"

Lightsong hesitated, glancing at the arena. "The joke that has been played on all of us," he said, voice growing softer. "The joke the others in the pantheon have played by giving me so much influence over what our kingdom will do."

Blushweaver frowned at him, obviously sensing the growing bitterness in his voice. They stopped on the walkway, Blushweaver facing him, her back to the arena floor. Lightsong feigned a smile, but the moment was dying. They couldn't go on as they had. Not amidst the weighty matters in motion all around them.

"Our brothers and sisters aren't as bad as you imply," she said quietly.

"Only a matchless group of idiots would give *me* control of their armies."

"They trust you."

"They're *lazy,*" Lightsong said. "They want others to make the difficult decisions. That's what this system encourages, Blushweaver. We're all locked in here, expected to spend our time in idleness and pleasure. And then we're supposed to know what is best for our country?" He shook his head. "We're more afraid of the outside than we're willing to admit. All we have are artworks and dreams. That's why you and I ended up with these armies. Nobody else wants to be the one who actually sends our troops out to kill and die. They all want to be involved, but nobody wants to be *responsible.*"

He fell silent. She looked up at him, a goddess of perfect form. So much stronger than the others, but she hid it behind her own veil of triviality. "I know one thing that you said is true," she said quietly.

"And that is?"

"You *are* wonderful, Lightsong."

He stood there, looking into her eyes for a time. Widely set, beautiful green eyes.

"You're not going to give me your Command Phrases, are you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I brought you into this," she said. "You always talk about being useless,

but we all know that you're one of the few who always goes through every picture, sculpture, and tapestry in his gallery. The one who hears every poem and song. The one who listens most deeply to the pleas of his petitioners."

"You are all fools," he said. "There is nothing in me to respect."

"No," she said. "You're the one who makes us laugh, even while you insult us. Can't you see what *that* does? Can't you see how you've inadvertently set yourself above everyone else? You didn't do it intentionally, Lightsong, and that's what makes it work so well. In a city of frivolity, you're the only one who's shown any measure of wisdom. In my opinion, that's why you hold the armies."

He didn't reply.

"I knew you might resist me," she said. "But I thought that I'd be able to influence you anyway."

"You can," he said. "As you've said, it's your doing that I'm involved in all of this."

She shook her head, still staring into his eyes. "I can't decide which feeling for you is stronger, Lightsong. My love or my frustration."

He took her hand and kissed it. "I accept them both, Blushweaver. With honor." And with that, he turned from her and went to his box. Weatherlove had arrived; that left only the God King and his bride. Lightsong sat down, wondering where Siri was. She usually got to the arena long before it was time to begin.

He found it difficult to focus his attention on the young queen. Blushweaver still stood on the walkway where he had left her, watching him.

Finally, she turned, and made her way to her own pavilion.

SIRI WALKED through the palace corridors, surrounded by her brown-uniformed serving women, a dozen worries circling through her brain.

First, go to Lightsong, she told herself, going over the plan. *It won't look odd for me to sit with him—we often spend time together at these things.*

I wait for Susebron to arrive. Then I ask Lightsong if we can talk in private, without our servants or his priests. I explain what I have discovered about the God King. I tell him about the way Susebron is being held captive. Then we see what he does.

Her biggest fear was that Lightsong would already know. Could he be part of the entire conspiracy? She trusted him as much as she trusted anyone except Susebron, but her nerves had a way of making her question everything and everyone.

She passed through room after room, each one decorated in its own color theme. She didn't notice how bright those were anymore.

Assuming Lightsong agrees to help, she thought, *I wait for the break. Once the priests leave the sand, Lightsong goes and speaks with several other gods. They each go to their priests and instruct them to begin a discussion in the arena about why the God King never speaks to them. They force the God King's priests to let him offer his own defense.*

She didn't like depending on the priests, even those who weren't members of Susebron's priesthood, but this did seem like the best way. Besides, if the priests of the various gods didn't do as instructed, Lightsong and the others would realize that they were being undermined by their own servants. Either way, Siri realized she was getting into very dangerous territory.

I started *in dangerous territory,* she thought, leaving the formal rooms of the palace and entering the dark outer hallway. *The man I love is threatened with death, and any children I bear will be taken from me.* She either had to act or let the priests continue to push her around. Susebron and she were in agreement. The best plan was—

Siri slowed. At the end of the hallway, in front of the doors out to the court, a small group of priests stood with several Lifeless soldiers. They were silhouetted by the evening light. The priests turned toward her, and one pointed.

Colors! Siri thought, spinning. Another group of priests was approaching up the back hallway. *No! Not now!*

The two groups of priests closed on her. Siri considered running, but where? Dashing in her long dress—pushing through servants and Lifeless—was hopeless. She raised her chin—eyeing the priests with a haughty stare—and kept her hair completely under control. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"We're terribly sorry, Vessel," the lead priest said. "But it has been decided that you shouldn't be exerting yourself while in your condition."

"My condition?" Siri asked icily. "What foolishness is this?"

"The child, Vessel," the priest said. "We can't risk danger to it. There are many who would try to harm you, should they know that you are carrying."

Siri froze. *Child?* she thought with shock. *How could they know that Susebron and I have actually started . . .*

But no. She would know if she were with child. However, she'd supposedly been sleeping with the God King for months now. That was just enough time for a pregnancy to have begun to show. It would sound plausible to the people of the city.

Fool! She thought to herself in a sudden panic. *Assuming they've already found their replacement God King, I don't actually need to bear them a child. They just have to make everyone* think *I was pregnant!*

"There is no child," she said. "You were just waiting—you just had to stall until you had an excuse to lock me away."

"Please, Vessel," one of the priests said, gesturing for a Lifeless to take her arm. She didn't struggle; she forced herself to remain calm, looking the priest in the eyes.

He looked away. "This will be for the best," he said. "It's for your own good."

"I'm sure it is," she snapped, but allowed herself to be led back to her rooms.

VIVENNA SAT AMONG THE CROWDS, watching and waiting. Part of her found it foolish to come out into the open so flagrantly. However, that part of her—the cautious Idrian princess—was growing more and more quiet.

Denth's people had found her when she'd been hiding in the slums. She'd probably be safer in the crowds with Vasher than she ever had been in the alleyways, particularly considering how well she now blended in. She hadn't realized how natural it could feel to sit in trousers and a tunic, brightly colored and completely ignored.

Vasher appeared at the railing above the benches. She carefully slipped out of her seat—someone else took it immediately—and walked toward him. The priests had already begun their arguments down below. Nanrovah, his daughter restored to him, had started by announcing the retraction of his previous position. He currently was leading the discussion against war.

He had very little support.

Vivenna joined Vasher along the railing, and he quite unapologetically elbowed open a space for her. He didn't carry Nightblood—at her insistence, he had left the sword behind with her own dueling blade. She wasn't certain how he'd managed to sneak the blade in the last time he'd come to the court, but the last thing they wanted was to draw attention.

"Well?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head. "If Denth is here, I couldn't find him."

"No surprise, considering the size of this crowd," Vivenna said quietly. There were bodies all around them—hundreds lining the railing alone. "Where did they all come from? This is far more jammed than the other assembly sessions."

He shrugged. "People who are granted a one-time visit to the court can hold their token of entry until they want to use it. A lot of them use those at a general court assembly, rather than one of the smaller meetings. It's their one chance to see all of the gods together."

Vivenna turned back to look over the throng. She suspected it also had to do with the rumors she'd heard. People thought that this session would be the one where the Pantheon of Returned finally declared war on Idris.

"Nanrovah argues well," she said, although she was having trouble hearing him because of the crowds—the Returned apparently had messengers relaying transcripts. She wondered why someone just didn't order all the people to be quiet. That didn't seem to be the Hallandren way. They liked chaos. Or, at least, they liked the opportunity to sit and chat while important events were in progress.

"Nanrovah is being ignored," Vasher said. "He's changed his mind twice now on the same issue. He lacks credibility."

"He should explain why he changed his mind, then."

"He might, but I don't know. If the people knew his child had been kidnapped, it would make some more afraid and they would decide that Idrian instigators had been behind it, no matter what he said. Plus there's that stubborn Hallandren pride. Priests are particularly bad. Mentioning that his daughter had been taken, and that he had been pressured into changing his politics . . ."

"I thought you liked the priests," she said.

"Some of them," he said. "Not others." When he said that, he eyed the

God King's pedestal. Susebron had yet to arrive, and they had started without him.

Siri wasn't there either. That annoyed Vivenna, since she'd been anticipating checking in on the girl, if only from a distance.

I'll help you, Siri. For real this time. The first step has to be stopping this war.

Vasher looked back at the floor of the arena, leaning on the railing, looking anxious.

"What?" she asked.

He shrugged.

She rolled her eyes. "Tell me."

"I just don't like leaving Nightblood alone for too long," he said.

"What's it going to do?" Vivenna asked. "We locked it in the closet."

He shrugged again.

"Honestly," she said. "You would think that you'd admit that bringing a five-foot-long black sword out in public would be rather conspicuous. It doesn't help, mind you, that said sword bleeds smoke and can talk in people's minds."

"I don't mind being conspicuous."

"I do," she replied.

Vasher grimaced, and she thought he'd argue some more, but he finally just nodded. "You're right, of course," he said. "I've just never been good at being unobtrusive. Denth used to make fun of me for that too."

Vivenna frowned. "You were friends?"

Vasher turned away and fell silent.

Kalad's Phantoms! she thought in frustration. *One of these days, someone in this Colors-cursed city is going to tell me the whole truth. I'll probably die of shock.*

"I'm going to go see if I can find out why the God King is taking so long," Vasher said, leaving the railing. "I'll be back."

She nodded, and he was gone. She leaned down, wishing she hadn't relinquished her seat. Once, she would have felt stifled by the large mass of people, but she'd grown used to the busy market streets, and so being surrounded by people wasn't as intimidating as it had been. Besides, there was her Breath. She'd put some of it into her shirt, but she'd held onto a portion—she needed to be of at least the First Heightening to pass through the gates into the court without being questioned.

Her Breath let her feel life as an ordinary person felt the air: always there, cool against the skin. Having so many people in such close proximity left her feeling a little intoxicated. So much life, so many hopes and desires. So much Breath. She closed her eyes, drinking it in, listening to the voices of the priests down below rise over the crowd.

She felt Vasher approach before he arrived. Not only did he have a lot of Breath, but he was watching her, and she could feel the slight familiarity of that gaze. She turned, picking him out of the crowd. He stood out far more than she did, in his darker, ragged clothing.

"Congratulations," he said as he approached, taking her arm.

"Why?"

"You'll soon be an aunt."

"What are you . . ." She trailed off. "*Siri?*"

"Your sister is pregnant," he said. "The priests are going to make an announcement later this evening. The God King is apparently remaining in his palace to celebrate."

Vivenna stood, stunned. *Siri. Pregnant.* Siri, who was still a little girl in Vivenna's mind, bearing the child of that *thing* in the palace. And yet wasn't Vivenna now fighting to keep that thing on his throne?

No, she thought. *I haven't forgiven Hallandren, even if I am learning not to hate it. I can't let Idris be attacked and destroyed.*

She felt a panic. Suddenly, all of her plans seemed meaningless. What would the Hallandren do to her once they had their heir? "We have to get her out," Vivenna found herself saying. "Vasher, we have to rescue her."

He remained quiet.

"*Please,* Vasher," she whispered. "She's my *sister.* I thought to protect her by ending this war, but if your hunch is right, then the God King himself is one of those who wants to invade Idris. Siri won't be safe with him."

"All right," Vasher said. "I will do what I can."

Vivenna nodded, turning back to the arena. The priests were withdrawing. "Where are they going?"

"To their gods," Lightsong said. "To seek the Will of the Pantheon in formal vote."

"About the war?" Vivenna asked, feeling a chill.

Vasher nodded. "It is time."

LIGHTSONG WAITED BENEATH HIS CANOPY, a couple of serving men fanning him, a cup of chilled juice in his hand, lavish snacks spread out to his side.

Blushweaver brought me into this, he thought. *Because she was worried that Hallandren would be taken by surprise.*

The priests were consulting with their gods. He could see several of them kneeling before their Returned, heads bowed. It was the way that government worked in Hallandren. The priests debated their options then they sought the will of the gods. That would become the Will of the Pantheon. That would become the Will of Hallandren itself. Only the God King could veto a decision of the full Pantheon.

And he had chosen not to attend this meeting.

So self-congratulatory on spawning a child that he couldn't even bother with the future of his people? Lightsong thought with annoyance. *I had hoped he was better than that.*

Llarimar approached. Though he had been down below with the other high priests, he had offered no arguments to the court. Llarimar tended to keep his thoughts to himself.

The high priest knelt before him. "Please, favor us with your will, Lightsong my god."

Lightsong didn't respond. He looked up, across the open arena to where Blushweaver's canopy stood, verdant in the dimming evening light.

"Oh, God," Llarimar said. "Please. Give me the knowledge I seek. Should we go to war with our kinsmen, the Idrians? Are they rebels who need to be quelled?"

Priests were already returning from their supplications. Each held aloft a flag indicating the will of their god or goddess. Green for a favorable response. Red for dissatisfaction with the petition. In this case green meant war. So far, five of the returning seven flew green.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked, looking up.

Lightsong stood. *They vote, but what good are their votes?* he thought, walking out from beneath his canopy. *They hold no authority. Only two votes really matter.*

More green. Flags flapped as priests ran down the walkways. The arena was abuzz with people. They could see the inevitable. To the side, Lightsong could see Llarimar following him. The man must be frustrated. Why didn't he ever show it?

Lightsong approached Blushweaver's pavilion. Almost all of the priests had gotten their answers, and the vast majority of them carried flags of green. Blushweaver's high priestess still knelt before her. Blushweaver, of course, waited upon the drama of the moment.

Lightsong stopped outside of her canopy. Blushweaver reclined inside, watching him calmly, though he could sense her true anxiety. He knew her too well.

"Are you going to make your will known?" she asked.

He looked down at the center of the arena. "If I resist," he said, "this declaration will be for naught. The gods can shout 'war' until they are blue, but *I* control the armies. If I don't allow them my Lifeless, then Hallandren will not win any wars."

"You would defy the Will of the Pantheon?"

"It is my right to do so," he said. "Just as any of them have the same right."

"But you have the Lifeless."

"That doesn't mean I have to do what I'm told."

There was a moment of silence before Blushweaver waved to her priestess. The woman stood, then raised a flag of green and ran down to join the others. This brought forth a roar. The people must know that Blushweaver's political wranglings had left her in a position of power. Not bad, for a person who had started without command of a single soldier.

With her control of that many troops, she'll be an integral part of the planning, diplomacy, and execution of the war. Blushweaver could emerge from this as one of the most powerful Returned in the history of the kingdom.

And so could I.

He stared for a long moment. He hadn't spoken of his dreams the last night to Llarimar. He'd kept them to himself. Those dreams of twisting tunnels and of the rising moon, just barely cresting the horizon. Could it be possible that they actually meant something?

He couldn't decide. About anything.

"I need to think about this some more," Lightsong said, turning to go.

"What?" Blushweaver demanded. "What about the vote?"

Lightsong shook his head.

"Lightsong!" she said as he left. "Lightsong, you can't leave us hanging like this!"

He shrugged, glancing back. "Actually, I can." He smiled. "I'm frustrating like that."

And with that, he left the arena, heading back to his palace without giving his vote.

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I'm glad you came back for me, Nightblood said. *It was very lonely in that closet.*

Vasher didn't reply as he walked across the top of the wall surrounding the Court of Gods. It was late, dark, and quiet, though a few of the palaces still shone with light. One of those belonged to Lightsong the Bold.

I don't like the darkness, Nightblood said.

"You mean darkness like now?" Vasher asked.

No. In the closet.

"You can't even see."

A person knows when they're in darkness, Nightblood said. *Even when they can't see.*

Vasher didn't know how to respond to that. He paused atop the wall, overlooking Lightsong's palace. Red and gold. Bold colors indeed.

You shouldn't ignore me, Nightblood said. *I don't like it.*

Vasher knelt down, studying the palace. He'd never met the one called Lightsong, but he had heard rumors. The most scurrilous of the gods, the most condescending and mocking. And this was the person who held the fate of two kingdoms in his hands.

There was an easy way to influence that fate.

We're going to kill him, aren't we? Nightblood said, eagerness sharp in his voice.

Vasher just stared at the palace.

We should kill him, Nightblood continued. *Come on. We should do it. We* really *should do it.*

"Why do you care?" Vasher whispered. "You don't know him."

He's evil, Nightblood said.

Vasher snorted. "You don't even know what that is."

For once, Nightblood was silent.

That was the great crux of the problem, the issue that had dominated most of Vasher's life. A thousand Breaths. That was what it took to Awaken an object of steel and give it sentience. Even Shashara hadn't fully understood the process, though she had first devised it.

It took a person who had reached the Ninth Heightening to Awaken stone or steel. Even then, this process shouldn't have worked. It should have created an Awakened object with no more of a mind than the tassels on his cloak.

Nightblood should not be alive. And yet he was. Shashara had always been the most talented of them, far more capable than Vasher himself, who had used tricks—like encasing bones in steel or stone—to make his creations. Shashara had been spurred on by the knowledge that she'd been shown up by Yesteel and the development of ichor-alcohol. She had studied, experimented, practiced. And she'd done it. She'd learned to forge the Breath of a thousand people into a piece of steel, Awaken it to sentience, and give it a Command. That single Command took on immense power, providing a foundation for the personality of the object Awakened.

With Nightblood, she and Vasher had spent much time in thought, then finally chosen a simple, yet elegant, Command. "Destroy evil." It had seemed like such a perfect, logical choice. There was only one problem, something neither of them had foreseen.

How was an object of steel—an object that was so removed from life that it would find the experience of living strange and alien—supposed to understand what "evil" was?

I'm figuring it out, Nightblood said. *I've had a lot of practice.*

The sword wasn't really to blame. It was a terrible, destructive thing—but it had been created to destroy. It still didn't understand life or what that life meant. It only knew its Command, and it tried so very hard to fulfill it.

That man down there, Nightblood said. *The god in the palace. He holds the power to start this war. You don't want this war to start. That's why he's evil.*

"Why does that make him evil?"

Because he will do what you don't want him to.

"We don't know that for certain," Vasher said. "Plus, who is to say that my judgment is best?"

It is, Nightblood said. *Let's go. Let's kill him. You told me war is bad. He will start a war. He's evil. Let's kill him. Let's kill him.*

The sword was getting excited; Vasher could feel it—feel the danger in its blade, the twisted power of Breaths that had been pulled from living hosts and shoved into something unnatural. He could picture them breathing out, black and corrupted, twisting in the wind. Drawing him toward Lightsong. Pushing him to kill.

"No," Vasher said.

Nightblood sighed. *You locked me in a closet,* he reminded. *You should apologize.*

"I'm not going to apologize by killing someone."

Just throw me in there, Nightblood said. *If he's evil, he'll kill himself.*

This gave Vasher pause. *Colors,* he thought. The sword seemed to be getting more subtle each year, though Vasher knew he was just imagining things, projecting. Awakened objects didn't change or grow, they simply were what they were.

It was still a good idea.

"Maybe later," Vasher said, turning away from the building.

You are afraid, Nightblood said.

"You don't know what fear is," Vasher replied.

I do. You don't like killing Returned. You're afraid of them.

The sword was wrong, of course. But, on the outside, Vasher supposed that his hesitation did look like fear. It had been a long time since he'd dealt with the Returned. Too many memories. Too much pain.

He made his way to the God King's palace. The structure was old, far older than the palaces that surrounded it. Once, this place had been a seaside outpost, overlooking the bay. No city. No colors. Just the stark, black tower. It amused Vasher that it had become the home of the God King of the Iridescent Tones.

Vasher slid Nightblood into a strap on his back then jumped from the wall toward the palace. Awakened tassels around his legs gave him extra strength, letting him leap some twenty feet. He slammed against the side of

the building, smooth onyx blocks rubbing his skin. He twitched his fingers, and the tassels on his sleeves grabbed on to the ledge above him, holding him tight.

He breathed. The belt at his waist—touching his skin, as always—Awakened. Color drained from the kerchief tied to his leg beneath his trousers.

"Climb things, then grab things, then pull me up," he Commanded. Three Commands in one Awakening, a difficult task for some. For him, however, it had become as simple as blinking.

The belt untied itself, revealing it to be far longer than it looked when wrapped around him. The twenty-five feet of rope snaked up the side of the building, curling inside of a window. Seconds later, the rope hauled Vasher up and into the air. Awakened objects could, if created well, have much more strength than regular muscles. He'd once seen a small group of ropes not much thicker than his own lift and toss boulders at an enemy fortification.

He released his tassel grips, then pulled Nightblood free as the rope deposited him inside the building. He knelt silently, eyes searching the darkness. The room was unoccupied. Carefully, he drew back his Breath, then wrapped the rope around his arm and held it in a loose coil. He stalked forward.

Who are we going to kill? Nightblood asked.

It's not always about killing, Vasher said.

Vivenna. Is she in here?

The sword was trying to interpret his thoughts again. It had trouble with things that weren't fully formed in Vasher's head. Most thoughts passed through a man's mind were fleeting and momentary. Flashes of image, sound, or scent. Connections made, then lost, then recovered again. That sort of thing was difficult for Nightblood to interpret.

Vivenna. The source of a lot of his troubles. His work in the city had been easier when he'd been able to assume that she was working willingly with Denth. Then, at least, he'd been able to blame her.

Where is she? Is she here? She doesn't like me, but I like her.

Vasher hesitated in the dark hallway. *You do?*

Yes. She's nice. And she's pretty.

Nice and pretty—words that Nightblood didn't really understand. He

had simply learned when to use them. Still, the sword did have opinions, and it rarely lied. It must like Vivenna, even if it couldn't explain why.

She reminds me of a Returned, the sword said.

Ah, Vasher thought. *Of course. That makes sense.* He moved on.

What? Nightblood said.

She's descended from one, he thought. *You can tell by the hair. There's a bit of Returned in her.*

Nightblood didn't respond to that, but Vasher could feel it thinking.

He paused at an intersection. He was pretty sure he knew where the God King's chambers would be. However, a lot of the interior seemed different now. The fortress had been stark, built with odd twists and turns to confuse an invading foe. Those remained—all the stonework was the same—but the open dining halls or garrison rooms had been split into many, smaller rooms, colorfully decorated in the mode of the Hallandren upper class.

Where would the God King's wife be? If she was pregnant, she'd be under the care of servants. One of the larger complex of chambers, he assumed, on a higher level. He made his way to a stairwell. Fortunately, it seemed late enough that there were very few people awake.

The sister, Nightblood said. *That's who you're after. You're rescuing Vivenna's sister!*

Vasher nodded quietly in the darkness, feeling his way up the stairs, counting on his BioChroma to let him know if he approached anyone. Though most of his Breath was stored in his clothing, he had just enough to awaken the rope and to keep him aware.

You like Vivenna too! Nightblood said.

Nonsense, Vasher thought.

Then why?

Her sister, he thought. *She's a key to all of this, somehow. I realized it today. As soon as the queen arrived, the real move to start the war surged.*

Nightblood fell silent. That kind of logical leap was a bit too complex for it. *I see,* he said, though Vasher smiled at the confusion he sensed in the voice.

At the very least, Vasher thought, *she's a very handy hostage for the Hallandren. The God King's priests—or whoever's behind this—can threaten the girl's life, should the war go poorly for them. She makes an excellent tool.*

One you intend to remove, Nightblood said.

Vasher nodded, reaching the top of the stairwell and slinking through one of the corridors. He walked until he sensed someone nearby—a maid servant approaching.

Vasher Awakened his rope, stood in the shadows of an alcove, and waited. As she passed, the rope shot from the shadows, wrapped around her waist, and yanked her into the darkness. Vasher had one of his tassel hands wrapped around her mouth before she could scream.

She squirmed, but the rope tied her tightly. He felt a little stab of guilt as he loomed over her, her terrified eyes tearing up. He reached for Nightblood and pulled the sword slightly out of its sheath. The girl immediately looked sick. A good sign.

"I need to know where the queen is," Vasher said, forcing Nightblood up so that his hilt touched her cheek. "You're going to tell me."

He held her like that for a time, watching her squirm, feeling unhappy with himself. Finally, he relaxed the tassels, keeping the sword against her cheek. She began to vomit, and he turned her to the side.

"Tell me," he whispered.

"Southern corner," the girl whispered, trembling, spittle on her cheek. "This floor."

Vasher nodded, then tied her up with the rope, gagged her, and took his Breath back. He pushed Nightblood back into the sheath then rushed down the hallway.

You won't kill a god who plans to march his armies to war? Nightblood asked. *But you'll nearly choke a young woman to death?*

It was a complicated statement for the sword. However, it lacked the accusation that a human would have put into the words. To Nightblood it really was just a question.

I don't understand my morality either, Vasher thought. *I'd suggest you avoid confusing yourself.*

He found the place easily. It was guarded by a large group of brutish men who seemed rather out of place in the fine palace hallways.

Vasher paused. *Something strange is going on here.*

What do you mean? Nightblood asked.

He hadn't meant to address the sword, but that was the trouble with an object that could read minds. Any thoughts Vasher formed in his head, Night-

blood thought were directed at it. After all, in the sword's opinion, *everything* really should have been directed toward it.

Guards at the door. Soldiers, not servants. So they had already taken her captive. Was she really even pregnant? Were the priests just securing their power?

That many men would be impossible to kill without making noise. The best he could hope for was to take them fast. Maybe they were far enough from anyone else that a brief fight wouldn't be heard.

He sat for a few minutes, jaw clenched. Then, finally, he stepped closer and tossed Nightblood in amongst the men. He'd let them fight each other and then be ready to deal with any who weren't taken into the sword's influence.

Nightblood clanged to the stones. All of the men's eyes turned toward it. And, at that moment, something grabbed Vasher by the shoulder and yanked him backward.

He cursed, spinning, throwing his hands up to wrestle with whatever had him. An Awakened rope. Men started to fight behind him. Vasher grunted, pulling out the knife in his boot, then slicing the Awakened rope. Someone tackled him as he got free, and he was thrown back against the wall.

He grabbed his attacker by the face with one of his arm tassels, then twisted the man back and threw him into the wall. Another figured charged him from behind, but Vasher's Awakened cloak caught that one, tripping him.

"Grab things other than me," Vasher said quickly, snatching the cloak of one of the fallen men and Awakening it. That cloak whipped about, taking down another man, whom Vasher then killed with a swipe of his dagger. He kicked another man, throwing him backward, opening a pathway.

Vasher lunged, making for Nightblood, but three more figures burst out the rooms around him, cutting him off. They were the same kind of brutish men that were now fighting over the sword. Men were all around. Dozens of them. Vasher kicked out, breaking a leg, but one man pulled Vasher's cloak off with a lucky twist. Others piled on top of him. And then, another Awakened rope snapped out, tying his legs together.

Vasher reached for his vest. "Your Breath to—" he began, trying to draw in some Breath to use for an attack, but three men grabbed his hand and

pulled it away. Within seconds, he was wrapped up in the Awakened rope. His cloak still fought against three men who were struggling to cut it up, but Vasher himself was pinned.

Someone emerged from the room to his left.

"Denth," Vasher spat, struggling.

"My good friend," Denth said, nodding for one of his lackeys—the one known as Tonk Fah—to move down the hallway toward the queen's room. Denth knelt beside Vasher. "Very good to see you."

Vasher spat again.

"Still as eloquent as ever, I see," Denth said with a sigh. "You know the best thing about you, Vasher? You're solid. Predictable. I guess I am too, in a way. Hard to live as long as we have without falling into patterns, eh?"

Vasher didn't reply, though he did try to yell as some men gagged him. He noticed with satisfaction that he'd taken down a good dozen opponents before they'd managed to stop him.

Denth eyed the fallen soldiers. "Mercenaries," he said. "No risk is too great, assuming the pay is right." He said it with a twinkle in his eye. Then he leaned down, his joviality gone as he met Vasher's eyes. "And you were always to be *my* payment, Vasher. I owe you. For Shashara, even still. We've been waiting, hidden in the palace here for a good two weeks, knowing that eventually the good Princess Vivenna would send you to save her sister."

Tonk Fah returned with a bundle held in a blanket. Nightblood.

Denth eyed it. "Throw that out somewhere far away," he said, grimacing.

"I don't know, Denth," Tonk Fah said. "I kind of think we should keep it. It could be very useful. . . ." The beginnings of the lust began to show in his eyes, the desire to draw Nightblood, to use the sword. To destroy evil. Or, really, just to destroy.

Denth stood and snatched the bundle away. Then he smacked Tonk Fah on the back of the head.

"Ow!" Tonk Fah said.

Denth rolled his eyes. "Stop whining; I just saved your life. Go check on the queen and then clean up that mess. I'll take care of the sword myself."

"You always get so nasty when Vasher's around," Tonk Fah grumbled, waddling away. Denth wrapped up Nightblood securely; Vasher watched, hoping to see the lust appear in Denth's eyes. Unfortunately, Denth was far

too strong-willed to be taken by the sword. He had nearly as much history with it as Vasher did.

"Take away all his Awakened clothing," Denth said to his men, walking away. "Then hang him up in that room over there. He and I are going to have a long talk about what he did to my sister."

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Lightsong sat in one of the rooms of his palace, surrounded by finery, a cup of wine in his hand. Despite the very late hour, servants moved in and out, piling up furniture, paintings, vases, and small sculptures. Anything that could be moved.

The riches sat in heaps. Lightsong lounged back on his couch, ignoring empty plates of food and broken cups, which he refused to let his servants take away.

A pair of servants entered, carrying a red and gold couch. They propped it up by the far wall, nearly toppling a pile of rugs. Lightsong watched them leave then downed the rest of his wine. He dropped the empty cup to the floor beside the others, and held out his hand for another full one. A servant provided, as always.

He wasn't drunk. He couldn't get drunk.

"Do you ever feel," Lightsong said, "like something is going on? Something far greater than you are? Like a painting you can only see the corner of, no matter how you squint and search?"

"Every day, Your Grace," Llarimar said. He sat on a stool beside Lightsong's couch. As always, he watched events calmly, though Lightsong could sense the man's disapproval as another group of servants piled several marble figurines in the corner.

"How do you deal with it?" Lightsong asked.

"I have faith, Your Grace, that someone understands."

"Not me, I hope," Lightsong noted.

"You are part of it. But it is much larger than you."

Lightsong frowned to himself, watching more servants enter. Soon the room would be so piled with his wealth that his servants wouldn't be able to move in and out. "It's odd, isn't it," Lightsong said, gesturing toward a pile of paintings. "Arranged like this, none of it looks beautiful anymore. When you put it together in piles, it just seems like junk."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. "The value in something relates to how it is treated, Your Grace. If you see these items as junk, then they are, regardless of what someone else would pay for them."

"There's a lesson in there somewhere, isn't there?"

Llarimar shrugged. "I *am* a priest, after all. We have a tendency to preach."

Lightsong snorted, then waved toward the servants. "That's enough," he said. "You can go now."

The servants, having grown resigned to being banished, left the room promptly. Soon Lightsong and Llarimar were alone with piles and piles of riches, all stolen from other parts of his palace and brought into this one room.

Llarimar surveyed the mounds. "So what *is* the point of all this, Your Grace?"

"This is what I mean to them," Lightsong said, gulping down some more wine. "The people. They'll give up their riches for me. They sacrifice the Breath of their souls to keep me alive. I suspect that many would even die for me."

Llarimar nodded quietly.

"And," Lightsong said, "all I'm expected to do at the moment is choose their fates for them. Do we go to war or do we remain at peace? What do you think?"

"I could argue for either side, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "It would be easy to sit here and condemn the war on mere principle. War is a terrible, terrible thing. And yet, it seems that few great accomplishments in history ever occur without the unfortunate fact of military action. Even the Many-war, which caused so much destruction, can be regarded as the foundation of modern Hallandren power in the Inner Sea region."

Lightsong nodded.

"But," Llarimar continued. "To attack our brethren? Despite provocation,

I cannot help but think that invading is too extreme. How much death, how much suffering, are we willing to cause simply to prove that we won't be pushed around?"

"And what would you decide?"

"Fortunately, I don't have to."

"And if you were forced to?" Lightsong asked.

Llarimar sat for a moment. Then, carefully, he removed the large miter from his head, revealing his thinning black hair plastered to the skull with sweat. He set aside the ceremonial headgear.

"I speak to you as a friend, Lightsong, not your priest," Llarimar said quietly. "The priest cannot influence his god for fear of disrupting the future."

Lightsong nodded.

"And as a friend," Llarimar said, "I honestly have trouble deciding what I would do. I didn't argue on the floor of the court."

"You rarely do," Lightsong said.

"I'm worried," Llarimar said, wiping his brow with a kerchief, shaking his head. "I don't think we can ignore the threat to our kingdom. The fact of the matter is, Idris *is* a rebel faction living within our borders. We've ignored them for years, enduring under their almost tyrannical control of the northern passes."

"So you're for attacking?"

Llarimar paused, then shook his head. "No. No, I don't think that even Idris's rebellion can justify the slaughter it would take to get those passes back."

"Great," Lightsong said flatly. "So, you think we should go to war, but not attack."

"Actually, yes," Llarimar said. "We declare war, we make a show of force, and we frighten them into realizing just how precarious their position is. If we then hold peace talks, I'll bet we could forge more favorable treaties for use of the passes. They formally renounce their claim to our throne; we recognize their independent sovereignty. Wouldn't we both get what we want?"

Lightsong sat thoughtfully. "I don't know," he said. "That's a very reasonable solution, but I don't think those who are calling for war would accept it. It seems that we're missing something, Scoot. Why now? Why are tensions so high after the wedding, which *should* have unified us?"

"I don't know, Your Grace," Llarimar said.

Lightsong smiled, standing. "Well then," he said, eyeing his high priest. "Let's find out."

Siri would have been annoyed if she hadn't been so terrified. She sat alone in the black bedchamber. It felt wrong for Susebron to not be there with her.

She'd hoped that maybe he would still be allowed come to her when night fell. But, of course, he didn't arrive. Whatever the priests were planning, it didn't require her to actually be pregnant. Not now that they'd played their hand and locked her up.

The door creaked, and she sat up on the bed, hope reviving. But it was only the guard checking on her again. One of the crass, soldierlike men who had been guarding her in recent hours. *Why did they change to these men?* she wondered as the guard closed the door. *What happened to the Lifeless and the priests who were watching me before?*

She lay back down on the bed, staring up at the canopy, still dressed in her fine gown. Her mind kept flashing to her first week in the palace, when she'd been locked inside for her "Wedding Jubilation." It had been difficult enough then, and she'd known when it would be over. Now she didn't even have an assurance that she'd live through the next few days.

No, she thought. *They'll keep me around long enough for my "baby" to be born. I'm insurance. If something goes wrong, they'll still need me to show off.*

That was little comfort. The thought of six months cooped up inside the palace—not allowed to see anyone lest they see that she wasn't really pregnant—was frightening enough to make her want to scream.

But what could she do?

Hope in Susebron, she thought. *I taught him to read, and I gave him the determination that he needed to break free from his priests.*

That will have to be enough.

"Your Grace," Llarimar said, his voice hesitant, "are you certain you want to do this?"

Lightsong crouched down, peeking through the bushes toward Mercystar's palace. Most of the windows were dark. That was good. However, she still had a number of guards patrolling the palace. She was afraid of another break-in.

And rightly so.

In the distance, he saw the moon just barely rising into the night sky. It almost matched the position he had seen in his dream the night before, the same dream where he'd seen the tunnels. Were these things really symbols? Signs from the future?

He still resisted. The truth was, he didn't want to believe he was a god. It implied too many things. But he couldn't ignore the images, even if they were just spoken from his subconscious. He had to get into those passages beneath the Court of Gods. Had to see if, at last, if there *was* something prophetic about what he had seen.

The timing seemed important. The rising moon . . . just another degree or so.

There, he thought, looking down from the sky. A guard patrol was approaching.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked, sounding more nervous. The portly high priest knelt on the grass beside Lightsong.

"I should have brought a sword," Lightsong said thoughtfully.

"You don't know how to use one, Your Grace."

"We don't know that," Lightsong said.

"Your Grace, this is foolishness. Let's go back to your palace. If we *must* see what is in those tunnels, we can hire someone from the city to sneak in."

"That would take too long," Lightsong said. A guard patrol passed their side of the palace. "You ready?" he asked once the patrol had passed.

"No."

"Then wait here," Lightsong said, taking off in a dash toward the palace.

After a moment, he heard a hissed "Kalad's Phantoms!" from Llarimar, followed by bushes rustling as the priest followed.

Why, I don't believe I've ever heard him curse before, Lightsong thought with amused energy. He didn't look back; he just kept running toward the open window. As in most Returned palaces, the doorways and windows were open. The tropical climate encouraged such designs. Lightsong reached the side of the building, feeling exhilarated. He climbed up through the window, then

reached a hand out to help Llarimar when he arrived. The hefty priest puffed and sweated, but Lightsong managed to pull him up and into the room.

They took a few moments, Llarimar resting with his back to the outer wall, gasping for breath.

"You really need to exercise more regularly, Scoot," Lightsong said, creeping toward the doorway and peeking out into the hall beyond.

Llarimar didn't answer. He just sat, puffing, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what was happening.

"I wonder why the man who attacked the building didn't come in through the window," Lightsong said. Then he noticed that the guards standing at the inner doorway had an easy view of this particular room. *Ah,* he thought. *Well, then. Time for the backup plan.* Lightsong stood up, walking out into the hallway. Llarimar followed, then jumped when he saw the guards. They had similar expressions of amazement on their faces.

"Hello," Lightsong said to the guards, then turned from them and walked down the hallway.

"Wait!" one said. "Stop!"

Lightsong turned toward them, frowning. "You dare command a god?"

They froze. Then they glanced at each other. One took off running in the opposite direction.

"They're going to alert others!" Llarimar said, rushing up. "We'll be caught."

"Then we should move quickly!" Lightsong said, taking off in another run. He smiled, hearing Llarimar grudgingly break into a jog behind him. They quickly reached the trapdoor.

Lightsong knelt, feeling around for a few moments before finding the hidden clasp. He triumphantly pulled the trapdoor open, then pointed down. Llarimar shook his head in resignation, then climbed down the ladder into darkness. Lightsong grabbed a lamp off the wall and followed. The remaining guard—unable to interfere with a god—simply watched with concern.

The bottom wasn't very far down. Lightsong found a tired Llarimar sitting on some boxes in what was obviously a small storage cellar.

"Congratulations, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "We've found the secret hiding place of their flour."

Lightsong snorted, moving through the chamber, poking at the walls.

"Something living," he said, pointing at one wall. "That direction. I can feel it with my life sense."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow, standing. They pulled back a few boxes, and behind them was a small tunnel entrance cut into the wall. Lightsong smiled, then crawled down through it, pushing the lamp ahead of him.

"I'm not sure I'll fit," Llarimar said.

"If I fit, you will," Lightsong said, voice muffled by the close confines. He heard another sigh from Llarimar, followed by shuffling as the portly man entered the hole. Eventually, Lightsong passed out of another hole into a much larger tunnel, lit by several lanterns hanging from one of the walls. He stood up, feeling self-satisfied as Llarimar squeezed through. "There," Lightsong said, throwing a lever and letting a grate drop down over the opening. "They'll have trouble following now!"

"And we'll have trouble escaping," Llarimar said.

"Escape?" Lightsong said, raising his lamp, inspecting the tunnel. "Why would we want to do that?"

"Pardon me, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "But it seems to me that you are getting far too much enjoyment from this experience."

"Well, I'm called Lightsong the *Bold,*" Lightsong said. "It feels good to finally be living up to the title. Now, hush. I can still feel life nearby."

The tunnel was obviously man-made, and resembled Lightsong's idea of a mine shaft. Just like the image from his dreams. The tunnels had several branches, and the life he sensed was straight ahead. Lightsong didn't go that way, but instead turned left, toward a tunnel that sloped steeply downward. He followed it for a few minutes to judge its likely trajectory.

"Figured it out yet?" Lightsong asked, turning to Llarimar, who had taken one of the lanterns, as this tunnel didn't have any light of its own.

"The Lifeless barracks," Llarimar said. "If this tunnel continues this way, it will lead directly to them."

Lightsong nodded. "Why would they need a secret tunnel to the barracks? Any god can go there whenever he wants."

Llarimar shook his head, and they continued down the tunnel. Sure enough, after a short time, they arrived at a trapdoor in the ceiling which—when pushed up—led into one of the dark, Lifeless warehouses. Lightsong shivered, looking out at the endless rows of legs, barely illuminated by his

lamp. He pulled his head back down, closed the trapdoor, and they followed the tunnel further.

"It goes in a square," he said quietly.

"With doors up into each of the Lifeless barracks I'll bet," Llarimar said. He reached out, taking a piece of dirt from the wall and crumbling it between his fingers. "This tunnel is newer than the one we were in up above."

Lightsong nodded. "We should keep moving," he said. "Those guards in Mercystar's palace know we're down here. I don't know who they'll tell, but I'd rather finish exploring before we get chased out."

Llarimar shivered visibly at that. They walked back up the steep tunnel to the main one just below the palace. Lightsong still felt life down a side tunnel, but he chose the other branch to explore. It soon became apparent that this one split and turned numerous times.

"Tunnels to some of the other palaces," he guessed, poking at a wooden beam used to support the shaft. "Old—much older than the tunnel to the barracks."

Llarimar nodded.

"All right, then," Lightsong said. "Time to find out where the main tunnel goes."

Llarimar followed as Lightsong approached the main tunnel. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to determine how close the life was. It was faint. Almost beyond his ability to sense. If everything else in this catacomb hadn't been merely rocks and dirt, he wouldn't even have noticed the life in the first place. He nodded to Llarimar, and they continued down the tunnel as quietly as possible.

Did it seem that he was able to move with surprising stealth? Did he have unremembered experience with sneaking about? He was certainly better at it than Llarimar. Of course, a tumbling boulder was probably better at moving quietly than Llarimar, considering his bulky clothing and his puffing exhalations.

The tunnel went on straight for a time without branches. Lightsong looked up, trying to estimate what was above them. *The God King's palace?* he guessed. He couldn't be certain; it was difficult to judge direction and distance under the ground.

He felt excited. Thrilled. This was something no god was supposed to do.

Sneaking at night, moving through secret tunnels, looking for secrets and clues. *Odd,* he thought. *They give us everything they think that we might want; they glut us with sensation and experience. And yet real feelings—fear, anxiety, excitement—are completely lost to us.*

He smiled. In the distance, he could hear voices. He turned down the lamp and crept forward extra quietly, waving for Llarimar to stay behind.

". . . have him up above," a masculine voice was saying. "He came for the princess's sister, as I said he would."

"You have what you want, then," said another voice. "Really, you pay far too much attention to that one."

"Do not underestimate Vasher," the first voice said. "He has accomplished more in his life than a hundred men, and has done more for the good of all people than you will ever be able to appreciate."

Silence.

"Aren't you planning to kill him?" said the second voice.

"Yes."

Silence.

"You're a strange one, Denth," the second voice said. "However, our goal is accomplished."

"You people don't have your war yet."

"We will."

Lightsong crouched beside a small pile of rubble. He could see light up ahead, but couldn't distinguish much beyond some moving shadows. His luck seemed remarkably good in arriving to hear this conversation. Was that proof that his dreams were, indeed, fortellings? Or was it just coincidence? It was very late at night, and anyone still up was likely to be engaged in clandestine activities.

"I have a job for you," the second voice said. "We've got someone I need you to interrogate."

"Too bad," the first voice said, growing distant. "I've got an old friend to torture. I just had to pause to dispose of his monstrosity of a sword."

"Denth! Come back here!"

"You didn't hire me, little man," the first voice said, growing fainter. "If you want to make me do something, go get your boss. Until then, you know where to find me."

Silence. And then, something moved behind Lightsong. He spun, and

could just barely make out Llarimar creeping forward. Lightsong waved him back, then joined him.

"What?" Llarimar whispered.

"Voices, ahead," Lightsong whispered back, the tunnel dark around them. "Talking about the war."

"Who were they?" Llarimar asked.

"I don't know," Lightsong whispered. "But I'm going to find out. Wait here while I—"

He was interrupted by a loud scream. Lightsong jumped. The sound came from the same place he had heard the voices, and it sounded like . . .

"Let go of me!" Blushweaver yelled. "What do you think you're doing! I'm a goddess!"

Lightsong stood up abruptly. A voice said something back to Blushweaver, but Lightsong was too far down the tunnel to make out the words.

"You will let me go!" Blushweaver yelled. "I—" she cut off sharply, crying out in pain.

Lightsong's heart was pounding. He took a step.

"Your Grace!" Llarimar said, standing. "We should go for help!"

"We *are* help," Lightsong said. He took a deep breath. Then—surprising himself—he charged down the tunnel. He quickly approached the light, rounding a corner and coming into a section of tunnel that had been worked with rock. In seconds, he was running on a smooth stone floor and burst into what appeared to be a dungeon.

Blushweaver was tied into a chair. A group of men wearing the robes of the God King's priests stood around her with several uniformed soldiers. Blushweaver's lip was bleeding, and she was crying through a gag that had been placed over her mouth. She wore a beautiful nightgown, but it was dirty and disheveled.

The men in the room looked up in surprise, obviously shocked to see someone come up behind them. Lightsong took advantage of this shock and threw his shoulder against the soldier nearest to him. He sent the man flying back into the wall, Lightsong's superior size and weight knocking him aside with ease. Lightsong knelt down and quickly pulled the fallen soldier's sword from its sheath.

"Aha!" Lightsong said, pointing the weapon at the men in front of him. "Who's first?"

The soldiers regarded him dumbly.

"I say, you!" Lightsong said, lunging at the next-closest guard.

He missed the man by a good three inches, fumbling and off-balance from the lunge. The guard finally realized what was going on and pulled out his own sword. The priests backed against the wall. Blushweaver blinked at her tears, looking shocked.

The soldier nearest Lightsong attacked, and Lightsong raised his blade awkwardly, trying to block, doing a horrible job of it. The guard at his feet suddenly threw himself at Lightsong's legs, toppling him to the ground. Then one of the standing guards thrust his sword into Lightsong's thigh.

The leg bled blood as red as that of any mortal. Suddenly, Lightsong knew pain. Pain literally greater than any he'd known in his short life.

He screamed.

He saw, through tears, Llarimar heroically trying to tackle a guard from behind, but the attack was almost as poorly executed as Lightsong's own. The soldiers stepped away, several guarding the tunnel, another holding his bloodied blade toward Lightsong's throat.

Funny, Lightsong thought, gritting his teeth against the pain. *That was not at all how I imagined this going.*

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Vivenna waited up for Vasher. He did not return.

She paced in the small, one-room hideout—the sixth in a series. They never spent more than a few days in each location. Unadorned, it held only their bedrolls, Vasher's pack, and a single flickering candle.

Vasher would have chastised her for wasting the candle. For a man who held a king's fortune in Breaths, he was surprisingly frugal.

She continued pacing. She knew that she should probably just go to sleep. Vasher could take care of himself. It seemed that the only one in the city who couldn't do *that* was Vivenna.

And yet he'd told her he was only going on a quick scouting mission. Though he was a solitary person himself, he apparently understood her desire to be a part of things, so he usually let her know where he was going and when to expect him back.

She'd never waited up for Denth to come back from a night mission, and she'd been working with Vasher for a fraction of the time she'd spent with the mercenaries. Why did she worry so much now?

Though she had felt like she was Denth's friend, she hadn't really cared about him. He'd been amusing and charming, but distant. Vasher was . . . well, who he was. There was no guile in him. He wore no false mask. She'd only met one other person like that: her sister, the one who would bear the God King's child.

Lord of Colors! Vivenna thought, still pacing. *How did things turn into such a mess?*

SIRI AWOKE WITH A START. There was shouting coming from outside her room. She roused herself quickly, moving over to the door and putting her ear to it. She could hear fighting. If she were going to run, perhaps now would be the time. She rattled the door, hoping for some reason that it was unlocked. It wasn't.

She cursed. She'd heard fighting earlier—screaming, and men dying. And now again. *Someone trying to rescue me, perhaps?* she thought hopefully. *But who?*

The door shook suddenly, and she jumped back as it opened. Treledees, high priest of the God King, stood in the doorway. "Quickly, child," he said, waving to her. "You must come with me."

Siri looked desperately for a way to run. She backed away from the priest, and he cursed quietly, waving for a couple of soldiers in city guard uniforms to rush in and grab her. She screamed for help.

"Quiet, you fool!" Treledees said. "We're trying to help you."

His lies rang hollow in her ears, and she struggled as the soldiers pulled her from the room. Outside, bodies were lying on the ground, some in guard uniforms, others in nondescript armor, still others with grey skin.

She heard fighting down the hallway, and she screamed toward it as the soldiers roughly pulled her away.

OLD CHAPPS, THEY CALLED HIM. Those who called him anything, that is.

He sat in his little boat, moving slowly across the dark water of the bay. Night fishing. During the day, one had to pay a fee to fish in T'Telir waters. Well, technically, during the night you were supposed to pay too.

But the thing about night was, nobody could see you. Old Chapps chuckled to himself, lowering his net over the side of the boat. The waters made their characteristic lap, lap, lap against the side of the boat. Dark. He liked it dark. Lap, lap, lap.

Occasionally, he was given better work. Taking bodies from one of the city's slumlords, weighting them down with rocks tied in a sack to the foot, then tossing them into the bay. There were probably hundreds of them down there, floating in the current with their feet weighed to the floor. A party of skeletons, having a dance. Dance, dance, dance.

No bodies tonight, though. Too bad. That meant fish. Free fish, he didn't have to pay tariffs on. And free fish were good fish.

No . . . a voice said to him. *A little bit more to your right.*

The sea talked to him sometimes. Coaxed him this way or that. He happily made his way in the direction indicated. He was out on the waters almost every night. They should know him pretty well by now.

Good. Drop the net.

He did so. It wasn't too deep in this part of the bay. He could drag the net behind his boat, pulling the weighted edges along the bottom, catching the smaller fish that came up into the shallows to feed. Not the best fish, but the sky was looking too dangerous to be out far from the shore. A storm brewing?

His net struck something. He grumbled, yanking it. Sometimes it got caught on debris or coral. It was heavy. Too heavy. He pulled the net back up over the side, then opened the shield on his lantern, risking a bit of light.

Tangled in the net, a sword lay in the bottom of his boat. Silvery, with a black handle.

Lap, lap, lap.

Ah, very nice, the voice said, much clearer now. *I hate the water. So wet and icky down there.*

Transfixed, Old Chapps reached out, picking up the weapon. It felt heavy in his hand.

I don't suppose you'd want to go destroy some evil, would you? the voice said. *I'm not really sure what that means, to be honest. I'll just trust you to decide.*

Old Chapps smiled.

Oh, all right, the sword said. *You can admire me a little bit longer, if you must. After that, though, we really need to get back to shore.*

Vasher awoke groggily.

He was tied by his wrists to a hook in the ceiling of a stone room. The

rope that had been used to tie him, he noticed, was the same one he'd used to tie up the maid. It had been completely drained of color.

In fact, everything around him was a uniform grey. He had been stripped save for his short, white underbreeches. He groaned, his arms feeling numb from the awkward angle of being hung by his wrists.

He wasn't gagged, but he had no Breath left—he'd used the last of it in the fight, to Awaken the cloak of the fallen man. He groaned.

A lantern burned in the corner. A figure stood next to it. "And so we both return," Denth said quietly.

Vasher didn't reply.

"I still owe you for Arsteel's death, too," Denth said quietly. "I want to know how you killed him."

"In a duel," Vasher said in a croaking voice.

"You didn't beat him in a duel, Vasher," Denth said, stepping forward. "I know it."

"Then maybe I snuck up and stabbed him from behind," Vasher said. "It's what he deserved."

Denth backhanded him across the face, causing him to swing from the hook. "Arsteel was a good man!"

"Once," Vasher said, tasting blood. "Once, we were all good men, Denth. Once."

Denth was quiet. "You think your little quest here will undo what you've done?"

"Better than becoming a mercenary," Vasher said. "Working for whomever will pay."

"I am what you made me," Denth said quietly.

"That girl trusted you. Vivenna."

Denth turned, eyes darkened, the lanternlight not quite reaching his face. "She was supposed to."

"She liked you. Then you killed her friend."

"Things got a little out of hand."

"They always do, with you," Vasher said.

Denth raised an eyebrow, his face growing amused in the wan light. "*I* get out of hand, Vasher? Me? When's the last time *I* started a war? Slaughtered tens of thousands? You're the one who betrayed his closest friend and killed the woman who loved him."

Vasher didn't respond. What argument could he offer? That Shashara had needed to die? It had been bad enough when she'd revealed the Commands to make Lifeless from a single breath. What if the way of making Awakened steel, like Nightblood, had entered the Manywar? Undead monsters slaughtering people with Awakened swords thirsting for blood?

None of that mattered to a man who'd seen his sister murdered by Vasher's hand. Besides, Vasher knew he had little credibility to stand on. He'd created his own monsters to fight in that war. Not Awakened steel like Nightblood, but deadly enough in their own right.

"I was going to let Tonk Fah have you," Denth said, turning away again. "He likes hurting things. It's a weakness he has. We all have weaknesses. With my direction, he's been able to restrict it to animals."

Denth turned to him, holding up a knife. "I've always wondered what he finds so enjoyable about causing pain."

Dawn was approaching. Vivenna threw off her blanket, unable to sleep. She dressed, frustrated, but not sure why. Vasher was probably just fine. He was likely out carousing somewhere.

Of course, she thought wryly, *carousing. That sounds* just *like him.*

He'd never stayed out an entire night before. Something had gone wrong. She slowed as she pulled on her belt, glancing over at Vasher's pack and the change of clothing he had inside of it. *Every single thing I've tried since I left Idris has failed miserably,* she thought, continuing to dress. *I failed as a revolutionary, I failed as a beggar, and I failed as a sister. What am I supposed to do? Find him? I don't even know where to start.*

She looked away from the pack. Failure. It wasn't something she'd been accustomed to, back in Idris. Everything she'd done there had turned out well.

Maybe that's what this is all about, she thought, sitting. *My hatred of Hallandren. My insistence on saving Siri, on taking her place.* When their father had chosen Siri over her, it had been the first time in her life she'd felt that she wasn't good enough. So she'd come to T'Telir, determined to prove the problem wasn't with her. It'd been with someone else. Anyone else. As long as Vivenna wasn't flawed.

But Hallandren had repeatedly proved that she *was* flawed. And now that she'd tried and failed so often, she found it hard to act. By choosing to act, she might fail—and that was so daunting that doing nothing seemed preferable.

It was the crowning arrogance in Vivenna's life. She bowed her head. One last bit of feathered hypocrisy to adorn her royal hair.

You want to be competent? she thought. *You want to learn to be in control of what goes on around you, rather than just being pushed around? Then you'll have to learn to deal with failure.*

It was frightening, but she knew it was true. She stood up and walked over to Vasher's pack. She pulled out a wrinkled overshirt and a pair of leggings. Both had tassels hanging from the cuffs.

Vivenna put them on. Vasher's spare cloak followed. It smelled like him, and was cut—like his other one—into the vague shape of a man. She understood, at least, one of the reasons his clothing looked so tattered.

She pulled out a couple of colorful handkerchiefs. "Protect me," she Commanded the cloak, imagining it grabbing people who tried to attack her. She placed a hand on the sleeve of the shirt.

"Upon call," she Commanded, "become my fingers and grip that which I must." She'd only heard Vasher give the Command a couple of times, and she still wasn't quite sure how to visualize what she wanted the shirt to do. She imagined the tassels closing around her hands as she had seen them do for Vasher.

She Awakened the leggings, commanding them to strengthen her legs. The leg tassels began to twist, and she raised each foot in turn, letting the tassels wrap around the bottoms. Her stance felt firmer, the leggings pulled tight against her skin.

Finally, she tied on the sword Vasher had given her. She still didn't know how to use it, though she could hold it properly. It felt right to bring it.

Then she left.

LIGHTSONG HAD RARELY SEEN a goddess cry.

"It wasn't supposed to go this way," Blushweaver said, heedless of the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I had things under control."

The dungeon beneath the God King's palace was a cramped room. Cages—like the kind that might be used for animals—lined both walls. They were large enough to hold a god. Lightsong couldn't decide if that was just a coincidence.

Blushweaver sniffled. "I thought I had the God King's priesthood on my side. We were working together."

Something's wrong about this, Lightsong thought, glancing at the group of priests chatting anxiously at the side of the room. Llarimar sat in his own cage—the one next to Lightsong's—head bowed.

Lightsong looked back at Blushweaver. "How long?" he asked. "How long were you working with them?"

"From the beginning," Blushweaver said. "I was supposed to get the Command phrases. We came up with the plan together!"

"Why did they turn on you?"

She shook her head, glancing down. "They claimed I didn't do my part. That I was withholding things from them."

"Were you?"

She looked away, eyes tearstained. She looked very odd, sitting in her cell. A beautiful woman of deific proportions, wearing a delicate silk gown, sitting on the ground, surrounded by bars. Crying.

We have to get out of here, Lightsong thought. He crawled over to the bars separating his cage from Llarimar's ignoring the pain of his thigh. "Scoot," he hissed. "Scoot!"

Llarimar glanced up. He looked haggard.

"What does one use to pick a lock?" Lightsong asked.

Llarimar blinked. "What?"

"Pick a lock," Lightsong said, pointing. "Maybe I'll discover that I know how to do it, if I get my hands into the right position. I still haven't figured out why my swordsmanship skills were so poor. But surely I can do this. If I can only remember what to use."

Llarimar stared at him.

"Maybe I—" Lightsong began.

"What is wrong with you?" Llarimar whispered.

Lightsong paused.

"What is wrong with you!" Llarimar bellowed, standing. "You were a *scribe,* Lightsong. A Colors-cursed *scribe*. Not a soldier. Not a detective. Not a thief. You were an accountant for a local moneylender!"

What? Lightsong thought.

"You were as much an idiot then as you are now!" Llarimar shouted. "Don't you ever *think* about what you're going to do before you just saunter off and do it! Why can't you just stop, occasionally, and ask yourself if you're being a complete fool or not? I'll give you a hint! The answer is *usually* yes!"

Lightsong stumbled back from the bars, shocked. Llarimar. *Llarimar* was yelling.

"And every time," Llarimar said, turning away, "*I* get in trouble with you. Nothing has changed. You become a god, and I *still* end up in prison!"

The heavy priest slumped down, breathing in deep gasps, shaking his head in obvious frustration. Blushweaver was staring at them. And so were the priests.

What is it I find odd about them? Lightsong thought, trying to sort out his thoughts and emotions as the group of priests approached.

"Lightsong," one of them said, stooping down beside his cage. "We need your Command phrases."

He snorted. "I'm sorry to say that I've forgotten them. You probably know my reputation for being weak-minded. I mean, what kind of fool would come charging in here and get himself captured so easily?"

He smiled at them.

The priest by his cage sighed, then waved a hand at the others. They unlocked Blushweaver's cage and pulled her out. She yelled and fought, and Lightsong smiled at the trouble she gave them. Yet there were six priests, and they finally managed to get her out.

Then one got out a knife and slit her throat.

The shock of the moment hit Lightsong like a physical force. He froze, eyes wide, watching in horror as the red blood spilled out the front of Blushweaver's throat, staining her beautiful nightgown.

Far more disturbing was the look of panicked terror in her eyes. Such beautiful eyes.

"*No!*" Lightsong screamed, slamming against the bars, reaching helplessly toward her. He strained his godly muscles, pressing himself against the steel as he felt his body begin to shake. It was useless. Even a perfect body couldn't push its way through steel.

"You bastards!" he yelled. "You Colors-cursed bastards!" He struggled, pounding the bars with one hand as Blushweaver's eyes began to dim.

And then her BioChroma faded. Like a blazing bonfire dimming down to a single candle. It puffed out.

"No . . ." Lightsong said, sliding down to his knees, numb.

The priest regarded him. "So you *did* care for her," he said. "I'm sorry that we had to do that." He knelt down, solemn. "However, Lightsong, we decided that we had to kill her so that you would understand that we're serious. I do know your reputation, and I know that you usually take things lightheartedly. That is a fine attribute to have in many situations. Right now, you must realize how dangerous things are. We have shown you that we will kill. If you don't do as we ask, others will die."

"Bastard . . ." Lightsong whispered.

"I need your Command phrases," the priest said. "This is important. More important than you can understand."

"You can beat them out of me," Lightsong growled, feeling rage slowly overwhelm his shock.

"No," the priest said, shaking his head. "We're actually new to all of this. We don't know how to torture very well, and it would take too much time to force you to talk that way. Those who *are* skilled at torture aren't being very cooperative right now. Never pay a mercenary before the job is done."

The priest waved, and the others left Blushweaver's corpse on the ground. Then they moved to Llarimar's cage.

"No!" Lightsong screamed.

"We are serious, Lightsong," the man said. "Very, very, serious. We know how much you care for your high priest. You now know that we will kill him if you don't do as we say."

"Why?" Lightsong said. "What is this even about? The God King you serve could order us to move the armies if he wanted to! We'd listen to him. Why do you care so much about those Command phrases?"

The priests forced Llarimar from his cage, then pushed him to his knees. One put a knife to his throat.

"Red panther!" Lightsong yelled, weeping. "That's the Command phrase. Please. Leave him be."

The priest nodded to the others, and they put Llarimar back in his cell. They left Blushweaver's corpse on the ground, facedown in the blood.

"I hope that you haven't lied to us, Lightsong," the main priest said. "We're not playing games. It would be unfortunate if we discovered that you

still are." He shook his head. "We are not cruel men. But we are working for something very important. Do not test us."

With that, he left. Lightsong barely noticed. He was still staring at Blushweaver, trying to convince himself that he was hallucinating, or that she was faking, or that *something* would change to make him realize that it was all just an elaborate scam.

"Please," he whispered. "Please, no. . . ."

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"What's the word on the street, Tuft?" Vivenna asked, sidling up to a beggar.

He snorted, holding out his cup to those few who passed in the early light. Tuft was always one of the first to arrive in the mornings. "Why do I care?" he said.

"Come on," Vivenna said. "You kicked me out of this spot on three different occasions. I figure you owe me something."

"I don't owe nobody nothing," he said, squinting at the passers by with his one eye. The other eye was simply an empty hole. He didn't wear a patch. "Particularly don't owe you nothing," he said. "You were a plant all the time. Not a real beggar."

"I . . ." Vivenna paused. "I wasn't a plant, Tuft. I just thought I should know what it was like."

"Huh?"

"Living among you," she said. "I figured your life couldn't be easy. But I couldn't know—not really *know*—until I tried it for myself. So I came to the streets. Determined to live here for a time."

"Foolish thing to do."

"No," she said. "The fools are those who pass, without even thinking about what it must be like to live like you. Maybe if they knew, they'd give you something."

She reached into her pocket, pulling out one of the bright handkerchiefs.

She placed one in the cup. "I don't have any coins, but I know you can sell that."

He grunted, eyeing it. "What do you mean by word on the street?"

"Disturbances," Vivenna said. "Ones that are out of the ordinary. Perhaps involving Awakeners."

"Go to the Third Dock slums," Tuft said. "Look around the buildings near the wharf. Maybe you'll find what you're looking for there."

LIGHT PEEKED THROUGH THE WINDOW.

Morning already? Vasher thought, head down, still hanging by his wrists.

He knew what to expect from torture. He was not new to it. He knew how to scream, how to give the torturer what he wanted. He knew how to not expend his strength in resisting too much.

He also knew that none of that was likely to do any good. How would he be after a week of torture? Blood dripped down his chest, staining his undershorts. A dozen small pains nagged at his skin, cuts that had been drenched in lemon juice.

Denth stood with his back facing Vasher, bloodied knives on the ground around him.

Vasher looked up, forcing a smile. "Not as much fun as you thought it would be, is it, Denth?"

Denth didn't turn.

There's still a good man in there, Vasher thought. *Even after all these years. He's just been beaten down. Bloodied. Cut up worse than I have been.*

"Torturing me won't bring her back," Vasher said.

Denth turned, eyes dark. "No. It won't." He picked up another knife.

THE PRIESTS PUSHED SIRI through the passageways of the palace. They occasionally passed corpses in the dark black hallways, and she could still hear fighting in places.

What is going on? Someone was attacking the palace. But who? For a moment, she hoped it was her people—her father's soldiers, coming to save her.

She discarded that immediately. The men opposing the priests were using Lifeless soldiers; that ruled out Idris.

It was someone else. A third force. And they wanted to free her from the grip of the priests. Hopefully, her calls for help would not go unheeded. Treledees and his men led her quickly through the palace, passing through the colorful inner rooms in their rush to get to wherever they were going.

The white cuffs of Siri's dress suddenly began to bend with color. She looked up with hope as they entered a last room. The God King stood inside the room, surrounded by a group of priests and soldiers.

"Susebron!" she said, straining against her captives.

He took a step toward her, but a guard held his arm, pulling him back. *They're touching him,* Siri thought. *All semblance of respect is gone. No need to pretend now.*

The God King looked down at his arm, frowning. He tried to tug it free, but another soldier stepped up to help hold him. Susebron glanced at this man, then at Siri, confused.

"I don't understand either," she said.

Treledees entered the room. "Bless the Colors," he said. "You've arrived. Quickly, we must go. This place is not safe."

"Treledees," Siri said, turning to glare at him. "What is going on?"

He ignored her.

"I am your *queen,*" Siri said. "You will answer my question!"

He actually stopped, surprising her. He turned with an annoyed look. "A group of Lifeless has attacked the palace, Vessel. They are trying to get to the God King."

"I figured out that much, priest," Siri snapped. "Who are they?"

"We don't know," Treledees said, turning from her. As he did, a distant scream came from outside the room. It was followed by the sound of fighting.

Treledees glanced toward the sounds. "We have to move," he said to one of the other priests. There were, perhaps, a dozen of them in the room, as well as a half-dozen soldiers. "The palace has too many doorways and passages. It would be too easy to surround us."

"The back exit?" the other priest said.

"If we can get to it," Treledees responded. "Where is that squadron of reinforcements I demanded?"

"They're not coming, Your Grace," a new voice said. Siri turned to see

Bluefingers, looking haggard, enter through the far door with a couple of wounded soldiers. "The enemy has taken the east wing and is pushing this way."

Treledees cursed.

"We have to get His Majesty to safety!" Bluefingers said.

"I'm well aware of that," Treledees snapped.

"If the east wing has fallen," the other priest said, "we won't be able to get out that way."

Siri watched, helpless, trying to get Bluefingers's attention. He met her eyes, then nodded covertly, smiling. "Your Grace," Bluefingers said. "We can escape through the tunnels."

The sounds of fighting were growing closer. It seemed to Siri that their room was virtually surrounded by combat.

"Perhaps," Treledees said as one of his priests rushed to the door to peek out. The soldiers who had come with Bluefingers were resting by the wall, bleeding. One of them seemed to have stopped breathing.

"We should go," Bluefingers said urgently.

Treledees was quiet. Then he walked over to one of the fallen soldiers and picked up the man's sword. "Very well," he said. "Gendren, take half of the soldiers and go with Bluefingers. Take His Majesty to safety." He looked at Bluefingers. "Seek the docks, if you can."

"Yes, Your Grace," Bluefingers said, looking relieved. The priests released the God King, and he rushed to Siri, taking her in his arms. She held him, tense, trying to sort through her emotions.

Bluefingers. Going with him made sense—the look in his eyes indicated that he had a plan to save her and the God King, get them away from the priests. And yet . . . something felt wrong to her.

One of the priests gathered three of the soldiers and then moved to the far side of the room, peeking out. They waved to Siri and the God King. The other priests joined Treledees, taking weapons from the dead guards, their expressions grim.

Bluefingers pulled on Siri's arm. "Come, my queen," he whispered. "I made you a promise before. Let's get you out of this mess."

"What about the priests?" she asked.

Treledees glanced at her. "Foolish girl. Go! The attackers are moving in this direction. We will let them see us, then we will lead them in another

direction. They will assume we know where the God King is." The priests with him did not look hopeful. If—when—they were caught, they would be slaughtered.

"Come on!" Bluefingers hissed.

Susebron looked at her, frightened. She slowly let Bluefingers tug her and the God King to the side, to where the solitary priest and three soldiers had been joined by a group of servants in brown. Something whispered in her mind. Something . . . Lightsong had told her.

Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike, he had said. *Sudden and surprising, that's how you want to do things. You don't want to appear nonthreatening—people are always suspicious of the innocent. The trick is to appear average.*

Average.

It was good advice. Advice that, likely, others knew. And understood. She glanced at Bluefingers, walking beside her, urging her forward. Nervous, as always.

The fighting, she thought. *Several groups have been contending back and forth, seizing control of my room. One force belongs to the priests. The second force—the one with the Lifeless—belongs to someone else. This mysterious third party.*

Someone in T'Telir had been pushing the kingdom toward war. But who would have anything at all to gain from such a disaster? Hallandren, which would expend huge resources to quell rebels, fighting a battle that they would win—but likely at great cost? It didn't make sense.

Who would gain the most if Hallandren and Idris went to war?

"Wait!" Siri said, stopping. Things were suddenly falling into place.

"Vessel?" Bluefingers asked. Susebron laid a hand on her shoulder, looking at her with confusion. *Why would the priests sacrifice themselves if they were planning to kill Susebron? Why would they simply let us go, allow us to flee, if the God King's safety were not their prime concern?*

She looked into Bluefingers's eyes, and saw him grow more nervous. His face paled, and she knew. "How does it feel, Bluefingers?" she asked. "You're from Pahn Kahl, yet everyone always just assumes that your people are Hallandren. The Pahn Kahl people were here first, in this land, but it was taken from you. Now you're just another province, part of the kingdom of your conquerors.

"You want to be free, but your people have no military of their own. And so here you are. Unable to fight. Unable to free yourselves. Considered second-class. And yet, if your oppressors were to get into a war, it might give you an opening. A chance to break away . . ."

He met her eyes, then took off in a dash, fleeing from the room.

"What in the name of the colors?" Treledees said.

Siri ignored him, looking up into the God King's face. "You were right all along," she said. "We *should* have trusted your priests."

"Vessel?" Treledees said, stalking over.

"We can't go that way," Siri said. "Bluefingers was leading us into a trap."

The high priest opened his mouth to respond, but she met his eyes sternly and turned her hair the deep red of anger. Bluefingers had betrayed her. The *one* person she'd thought she could trust to help them.

"We go for the front gates, then," Treledees said, looking over their motley collection of priests and wounded soldiers. "And try to fight our way out."

IT WAS EASY for Vivenna to find the location the beggar had mentioned. The building—a slum tenement—was surrounded by gawkers, despite the morning hour. People whispered, talking about spirits and death and ghosts from the sea. Vivenna stopped at the perimeter, trying to see what had drawn their attention.

The docks were to her left, the sea brine pungent. The dock slums, where many of the dockhands lived and drank, were a small section of buildings clustered between warehouses and shipyards. Why would Vasher have come here? He had been planning to visit the Court of Gods. From what she could gather, there had been a murder in the building where the crowd had formed. People whispered of ghosts and of Kalad's Phantoms, but Vivenna simply shook her head. This wasn't what she was looking for. She'd have to—

Vivenna? The voice was faint, but she could just barely make it out. And recognize it.

"Nightblood?" she whispered.

Vivenna. Come get me.

She shivered. She wanted to turn and run—even thinking about the

sword was nauseating. Yet Vasher had taken Nightblood with him. She was in the right place after all.

The gawkers spoke of a murder. Was Vasher the person who had been killed?

Suddenly concerned, she shoved her way through the crowd, ignoring yells that she should stay back. She climbed up the stairs, passing door after door. In her haste, she almost missed the one with black smoke creeping out under it.

She froze. Then, taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room was poorly kept, the floor littered with trash, the furniture rickety and worn. Four dead bodies lay on the floor. Nightblood was stuck in the chest of the fourth, an old man with a leathery face who lay on his side, dead eyes wide.

Vivenna! Nightblood said happily. *You found me. I'm so excited. I tried to get them to take me to the Court of Gods, but it didn't turn out well. He did draw me a little bit. That's good, right?*

She fell to her knees, feeling sick.

Vivenna? Nightblood asked. *I did well, right? VaraTreledees threw me into the ocean, but I got back out. I'm quite satisfied. You should tell me that I did well.*

She didn't respond.

Oh, Nightblood said. *And Vasher is hurt, I think. We should go find him.*

She looked up. "Where?" she asked, uncertain if the sword would even be able to hear her.

The God King's palace, Nightblood said. *He went to get your sister out. I think he likes you, even though he says he doesn't. He says you're annoying.*

Vivenna blinked. "Siri? You went after Siri?"

Yes, but VaraTreledees stopped us.

"Who is that?" She asked, frowning.

You call him Denth. He's Shashara's brother. I wonder if she's here too. I'm not sure why he threw me in the water. I thought he liked me.

"Vasher . . ." she said, climbing back to her feet, feeling woozy from the sword's influence. Vasher had been taken by Denth. She shivered, remembering the anger in Denth's voice when he'd spoken of Vasher. She gritted

her teeth and grabbed a dirty blanket off the crude bed and wrapped it around Nightblood so that she wouldn't have to touch him.

Ah, Nightblood said. *You don't really need to do that. I had the old man clean me off after he got me out of the water.*

She ignored the sword, managing to lift the bundle with only slight nausea. Then she left, heading for the Court of Gods.

LIGHTSONG SAT, staring at the stones in front of him. A trickle of Blushweaver's blood was making its way down a crack in the rock.

"Your Grace?" Llarimar asked quietly. He stood up against the bars between their cages.

Lightsong didn't respond.

"Your Grace, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"What good is godhood?" Lightsong whispered.

Silence. Lanterns flickered on either side of the small chamber. Nobody had cleaned up Blushweaver's body, though they had left a couple of priests and Lifeless behind to watch Lightsong. They still needed him, should it turn out that he'd lied about the Command phrases.

He hadn't.

"What?" Llarimar finally asked.

"What good is it?" Lightsong said. "We aren't gods. Gods don't die like that. A little cut. Not even as wide as my palm."

"I'm sorry," Llarimar said. "She was a good woman, even among gods."

"She wasn't a god," Lightsong said. "None of us are. Those dreams are lies, if they led me to this. I've always known the truth, but nobody pays attention to what I say. Shouldn't they listen to the one they worship? Particularly if he's telling you *not* to worship him?"

"I . . ." Llarimar seemed at a loss for words.

"They should have seen," Lightsong hissed. "They should have seen the truth about me! An idiot. Not a god, but a scribe. A silly little scribe who was allowed to play god for a few years! A coward."

"You're no coward," Llarimar said.

"I couldn't save her," Lightsong said. "I couldn't do anything. I just sat

there and screamed. Maybe if I'd been more brave, I'd have joined with her and taken control of the armies. But I hesitated. And now she's dead."

Silence.

"You were a scribe," Llarimar said quietly to the damp air. "And you were one of the best men I'd ever known. You were my brother."

Lightsong looked up.

Llarimar stared out through the bars, staring at one of the flickering lanterns hanging from the stark stone wall. "I was a priest, even then. I worked in the palace of Kindwinds the Honest. I saw how he lied to play political games. The longer I stayed in that palace, the more my faith waned."

He fell silent for a moment, then he looked up. "And then you died. Died rescuing my daughter. That's the girl you see in your visions, Lightsong. The description is perfect. She was your favorite niece. Still would be, I assume. If you hadn't . . ." He shook his head. "When we found you dead, I lost hope. I was going to resign my position. I knelt above your body, weeping. And then, the Colors started to glow. You lifted your head, body changing, getting larger, muscles growing stronger.

"I knew it at that moment. I knew that if a man like *you* were chosen to Return—a man who had died to save another—then the Iridescent Tones were real. The visions were real. And the gods were real. You gave me back my faith, Stennimar."

He met Lightsong's eyes. "You *are* a god. To me, at least. It doesn't matter how easily you can be killed, how much Breath you have, or how you look. It has to do with who you are and what you mean."

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"There is fighting at the front gates, Your Excellency," the bloodied soldier said. "The insurgents are fighting each other there. We . . . we might be able to get out."

Siri felt a stab of relief. Finally, something going right.

Treledees turned toward her. "If we can get into the city, the people will rally around their God King. We should be safe there."

"Where did they get so many Lifeless?" Siri asked.

Treledees shook his head. They had paused in a room near the front of the palace, desperate, yet unsure. Breaking through the Pahn Kahl fortification of the Court of Gods was bound to be difficult.

She looked up at Susebron. His priests treated him like a child—they gave him respect, but they obviously gave no thought to ask his opinion. For his part, he stood, hand on her shoulder. She saw thoughts and ideas working behind those eyes of his, but there was nothing for him to write on to tell her.

"Vessel," Treledees said, drawing her attention. "You need to know something."

She looked at him.

"I hesitate to mention this," Treledees said, "as you are not a priest. But . . . if you survive and we do not . . ."

"Speak it," she commanded.

"You cannot bear the God King a child," he said. "Like all Returned, he is unable to sire children. We have not yet learned how the First Returned managed to have a child all those years ago. In fact . . ."

"You don't even think he did," she said. "You think the royal line is a fabrication." *Of course the priests dispute the record of the royal line coming from the first Returned,* she thought. *They wouldn't want to give credibility to Idris's claim to the throne.*

He flushed. "It's what people believe that matters. Regardless, we . . . have a child . . ."

"Yes," Siri said. "A Returned child you are going to make the next God King."

He looked at her, shocked. "You *know*?"

"You're planning to kill him, aren't you?" she hissed. "Take Susebron's Breath and leave him dead!"

"Colors, no!" Treledees said, shocked. "How—how could you think? No, we'd never do such a thing! Vessel, the God King needs only give away the treasure of Breaths he holds, investing them into the next God King, and then he can live the rest of his life—so long as he should desire—in peace. We change God Kings whenever an infant Returns. It is our sign that the previous God King has done his duty, and should be allowed to live the rest of his life without bearing his terrible burdens."

Siri looked at him skeptically. "That's foolish, Treledees. If the God King gives away his Breath, he will die."

"No, there is a way," the priest said.

"That is supposed to be impossible."

"Not at all. Think about it. The God King has *two* sources of Breath. One is his innate, divine Breath—that which makes him Returned. The other is the Breath given to him as the Treasure of Peacegiver, fifty thousand Breaths strong. *That* he could use as any Awakener could, as long as he is careful about the Commands he uses. He could also survive quite easily as a Returned without it. Any of the other gods could do the same, should they gain Breath beyond the one a week which sustains them. They'd consume them at a rate of one a week, of course, but they could stockpile them and use the extras in the meantime."

"You keep them from realizing that, though," Siri said.

"Not *keep* specifically," the priest said, looking away. "It does not arise. Why would the Returned care about Awakening? They have everything they need."

"Except knowledge," Siri said. "You keep them in ignorance. I'm surprised you didn't cut out all their tongues to hide your precious secrets."

Treledees looked back at her, expression hardening. "You judge us still. We do what we do because it is what we *must,* Vessel. The power he holds in that Treasure—fifty thousand Breaths—could destroy kingdoms. It is too great a weapon; we were charged as our sole, divine mission to keep it safe and *not* let it be used. If Kalad's army ever returns from where it was exiled, we—"

A sound came from a nearby room. Treledees looked, concerned, and Susebron's grip on Siri's shoulder tightened.

She looked up, concerned. "Treledees," she said. "I need to know. How? How can Susebron give away his Breath? He can speak no Command!"

"I—"

Treledees was interrupted by a group of Lifeless bursting through the doorway to their left. Treledees yelled for her to flee, but another group of the creatures came through the other way. Siri cursed, grabbing Susebron's hand, pulling him toward yet another doorway. She pulled it open.

Bluefingers stood on the other side. He looked into her eyes, face grim. Lifeless stood behind him.

Siri felt a stab of terror, backing away. Sounds of fighting came from behind her, but she was too focused on the Lifeless stepping around Bluefingers toward her and Susebron. The God King cried out, a tongueless, wordless groan of anger.

And then the priests were there. They threw themselves in front of the Lifeless, trying to beat them back, trying desperately to protect their God King. Siri clung to her husband in the ruddy room, watching as the priests were slaughtered by emotionless warriors with grey faces. Priest after priest jumped in the way, some with weapons, others simply waving their arms in a hopeless attack.

She saw Treledees grit his teeth, terror showing in his eyes as he ran forward, trying to attack a Lifeless. He died like the others. His secrets died with him.

The Lifeless stepped over the corpses. Susebron pushed Siri behind him, arms shaking as he backed them toward a wall, facing down the bloodied

monsters. The Lifeless finally stopped, and Bluefingers walked around them, looking past Susebron toward her.

"And now, Vessel, I believe we were going somewhere."

"I'm sorry, miss," the guard said, holding up a hand. "All access to the Court of Gods is forbidden."

Vivenna ground her teeth. "This is unacceptable," she said. "I'm to report to the goddess Allmother at once! Can't you see how many Breaths I hold? I'm not someone you can just turn away!"

The guards remained firm. There were a good two dozen of them at the gates, stopping anyone who tried to enter. Vivenna turned away. Whatever Vasher had done inside the night before, he'd apparently caused quite a stir. People clustered around the gateway to the court, demanding answers, asking if something was wrong. Vivenna made her way back through them, leaving the gates behind.

Go to the side, Nightblood said. *Vasher never asks if he can enter. He just goes in.*

Vivenna glanced at the side of the plateau. There was a short rocky ledge running around the outside of the wall. With the guards so distracted by the people wanting in . . .

She slipped to the side. It was early in the morning yet, the sun not having crested the eastern mountains. There were guards on the wall above—she could feel them with her life sense—but she was below their angle of view as long as they looked outward. She might be able to sneak by them.

She waited until one patrol had passed, then Awakened one of the tapestries. "Lift me," she said, dropping a drained handkerchief. The tapestry twisted into the air, wrapping around her, the top end still attached to the wall. Like a muscular arm, it lifted her up, twisting and depositing her atop the wall. She glanced around, recovering her breath. To the side, some distance away, a group of guards was pointing at her.

You're not any better at this than Vasher is, Nightblood noted. *You people can't sneak at all! Yesteel would be so disappointed in you.*

She cursed, Awakened the tapestry again and had it lower her into the court. She recovered her breath, then took off running across the grassy

lawn. Few people were about, but that only made her stand out even more.

The palace, Nightblood said. *Go there.*

That was where she *was* going. However, the longer she held the sword, the more she understood that it said whatever came to its steely mind, whether or not its comments were relevant. It was like a child, speaking or asking questions without inhibition.

The front of the palace was very well guarded by a group of men who weren't wearing uniforms. *He's in there,* Nightblood said. *I can feel him. Third floor. Where he and I were before.*

Vivenna got an image of the room shoved into her head. She frowned. *Remarkably useful,* she thought, *for an evil weapon of destruction.*

I'm not evil, Nightblood said, voice not defensive, simply informative. As if reminding her of something she'd forgotten. *I destroy evil. I think maybe we should destroy those men up ahead. They look evil. You should pull me out.*

For some reason, she doubted that would be a good idea.

Come on, Nightblood said.

The soldiers were pointing at her. She glanced behind, and saw others rushing across the lawn. *Austre, forgive me,* she thought. Then, gritting her teeth, she threw Nightblood—blanket and all—toward the guards in front of the building.

They halted. To a man, they looked down at the sword as it rolled free of the blanket, silver sheath glistening on the lawn. *Well, I guess this works too,* Nightblood noted, voice feeling distant now.

One of the soldiers picked up the sword. Vivenna dashed past them, ignored by the soldiers. They started to fight.

Can't go that way, she thought, eyeing the front entrance, not wanting to risk pushing her way through fighting men. So instead she ran to the side of the massive palace. The lower levels were made of the steplike black blocks that gave the palace its pyramidlike quality. Above these, it grew into a more traditional fortress, with steep walls. There were windows, if she could reach them.

She twitched her fingers, making the tassels on her sleeves clench and unclench. Then she jumped, her Awakened leggings tossing her up a few extra feet. She reached up and made the tassels grab the edge of the large, black block. The tassels just barely held, gripping the stone like footlong fingers. With difficulty, Vivenna pulled herself up onto the block.

Men yelled and screamed below, and she spared them a glance. The guard who had grabbed Nightblood was fighting off the others, a small trail of black smoke swirling around him. As she watched, he backed into the palace itself, the other men following him.

So much evil, Nightblood said, like a woman tisking as she cleaned cobwebs from her ceiling.

Vivenna turned away, feeling slightly guilty for giving the sword to the men. She jumped up and pulled herself onto the next block, continuing as the soldiers who had seen her from the walls arrived. They wore the colors of the city guard, and while a couple of them got caught up in the Nightblood fight, most of them ignored it.

Vivenna continued up.

To the right, Nightblood said distantly. *That window on the third floor. Two over. He's in there . . .*

As his voice faded, Vivenna looked up at the window indicated. She still had to climb up a number of blocks, then somehow reach a window that was an entire story up a sheer wall. There did appear to be some decorative stonework that could serve as handholds, but she grew dizzy even thinking about climbing them.

An arrow snapped against the stone beside her, making her jump. Several guards below had bows.

Colors! she thought, pulling herself up to the next block. She heard a whoosh behind her, and cringed, feeling as if she should have been struck, but nothing happened. She pulled herself up onto the block, then twisted around.

She could just barely see a corner of her cloak holding an arrow. She started, grateful that she had Awakened it. It dropped the arrow, then returned to normal.

Handy, that, she thought, climbing up the last block. By the time she got on top of it, her arms were sore. Fortunately, her Awakened fingers were still gripping as well as ever. She took a deep breath, then began to climb straight up the upper wall of the black fortress, using the carvings as handholds.

And decided, for her own sanity, that she'd better avoid looking down.

LIGHTSONG STARED AHEAD. Too much information. To much was happening. Blushweaver's murder, then Llarimar's revelation, the betrayal of the God King's priests all in such quick succession.

He sat in his cell, arms wrapped around himself, gold and red robes dirtied from crawling through the tunnel, then sitting in his cage. His thigh ached from where it had been struck with the sword, though the wound had not been bad, and it was barely bleeding anymore. He ignored the pain. It was insignificant compared to the pain inside.

The priests talked quietly on the far side of the room. Oddly, as he glanced at them, something caught his eye. He let his mind be diverted by the realization—he finally grasped what was bothering him about them. He should have seen it earlier. It had to do with color—not the color of their clothing, but the color of their faces. It was just slightly off. The deviation in one man would have been easy to ignore. But all of them together was a pattern.

No regular person could have noticed it. To a man with his Heightenings, it was obvious, once he knew what to look for.

These men were not from Hallandren.

Anyone can wear a set of robes, he realized. *That doesn't mean that they're priests.* In fact, judging by the faces, he realized the men must be from Pahn Kahl.

And then it all made sense to him, that quickly. They'd all been played for fools.

"BLUEFINGERS," SIRI DEMANDED. "Talk to me. What are you going to do with us?"

The labyrinth of the God King's palace was complex, and it was sometimes difficult even now for her to find her way around. They'd traveled down a stairwell but now were going up another one.

Bluefingers didn't answer. He walked with his customary nervousness, wringing his hands. The fighting in the hallways seemed to be decreasing. In fact, once they left the stairwell, this newest hallway was dreadfully quiet.

Siri walked with Susebron's nervous arm around her waist. She didn't know what he was thinking—they hadn't been able to pause long enough for

him to write anything. He gave her a comforting smile, but she knew that this all must be just as terrifying for him as it was for her. Probably more so.

"You can't do this, Bluefingers," Siri said, snapping at the little balding man.

"It is the only way we'd ever be able to break free," Bluefingers said, not turning, but finally responding to her.

"But you can't!" Siri said. "The Idrians are innocent!"

Bluefingers shook his head. "How many of my people would you sacrifice, if it would mean the freedom for yours?"

"None!" she said.

"I should like to see you say that if our positions were reversed," he said, still not meeting her eyes. "I'm . . . sorry for your pain. But your people are *not* innocent. They're just like the Hallandren. In the Manywar, you rolled over us, made us your workers and slaves. Only at the end, when the royal family fled, did Idris and Hallandren split."

"Please," Siri said.

Susebron suddenly punched a Lifeless.

The God King growled, struggling as he kicked at another. There were dozens of them. He looked at her, waving a hand, motioning for her to flee. She didn't intend to leave him. Instead, she tried to grab Bluefingers, but a Lifeless was too quick. It took her arm, holding her firm, even when she batted at it. A couple of men wearing the robes of Susebron's priesthood came out of a stairwell ahead of them, carrying lanterns. Siri, looking closely, immediately recognized them as being from Pahn Kahl. They were too short and their skin color was just slightly off.

I've been a fool, she thought.

Bluefingers had played the game so well. He'd driven a wedge between her and the priests from the start. Most of her fears and worries, she'd gotten from him—and it had been reinforced by the priest's arrogance. All part of the scribe's plan to someday use her to gain freedom for his people.

"We have Lightsong's security phrase," one of the new men said to Bluefingers. "We have checked it, and it works. We changed it to the new one. The rest of the Lifeless are ours."

Siri glanced to the side. The Lifeless had pulled Susebron to the ground. He yelled—though it came out as more a moan. Siri yanked, trying to escape her Lifeless and help him. She began to cry.

To the side, Bluefingers nodded to his accomplices, looking fatigued. "Very well. Give the Command. Order the Lifeless to march on Idris."

"It will be done," the man said, laying a hand on Bluefingers's shoulder.

Bluefingers nodded, looking morose as the others withdrew.

"What do you have to be sad about?" she spat.

Bluefingers turned toward her. "My friends now are the only ones who know the Command phrases for Hallandren's Lifeless army. Once those Lifeless leave for Idris—with orders to destroy everything they find there—my friends will kill themselves with poison. There won't be anyone who can stop the creatures."

Austre . . . Siri thought, feeling numb. *Lord of Colors . . .*

"Take the God King below," Bluefingers said, waving to several Lifeless. "Hold him until it is time." They were joined by a Pahn Kahl scribe wearing fake priest's robes as they towed Susebron toward the stairwell. Siri reached for him. He continued to struggle, reaching back, but the Lifeless were too strong. She listened to his inarticulate yells echoing down the stairwell.

"What will you do with him?" Siri asked, tears cold on her cheeks.

Bluefingers glanced at her, but once again, would not meet her eyes. "There will be many in the Hallandren government who see the Lifeless attack as a political mistake, and they may seek to stop the war. Unless Hallandren actually commits itself to this fight, our sacrifice will be useless."

"I don't understand."

"We will take the bodies of Lightsong and Blushweaver—the two gods with the Command phrases—and leave them in the Lifeless barracks, surrounded by dead Idrians we took from the city. Then we will leave the corpse of the God King to be discovered in the palace dungeons. Those who investigate will assume that Idrian assassins attacked and killed him—we've hired enough mercenaries from the Idrian slums that it shouldn't be too difficult to believe. Those of my scribes who survive the night will confirm the story."

Siri blinked out tears. *Everyone will assume that Blushweaver and Lightsong sent the armies as retribution for the death of the God King.*

And with the king dead, the people will be furious.

"I wish you hadn't gotten involved in all of this," Bluefingers said, motioning for her Lifeless captors to pull her along. "It would have been easier for me if you'd been able to keep yourself from getting pregnant."

"I'm not!" she said.

"The people think you are," he said with a sigh as they walked toward the stairwell. "And that's enough. We have to break this government *and* we have to make the Idrians angry enough to want to destroy the Hallandren. I think your people will do better in this war than everyone says, especially if the Lifeless march without leadership. Your people will ambush them, making sure this is not an easy war for either side."

He glanced at her. "But for this war to work right, the Idrians have to *want* to fight. Otherwise, they'll flee and vanish into those highlands. No, both sides have to hate each other, pull as many allies into the battle as possible so that everyone is too distracted . . ."

And what better way to make Idris willing to fight, she thought with horror, *than to kill me? Both sides will see the death of my supposed child as an act of war. This won't simply be a fight for domination. It will be a drawn-out war of hatred. The fighting could last for decades.*

And nobody will ever realize that our real enemy—the one who started it all—is the peaceful, quiet province to the south of Hallandren.

56

Vivenna hung outside the window, breathing deeply, sweating heavily. She'd peeked inside. Denth was in there, as was Tonk Fah. Vasher was hanging from a hook on the ceiling. He was bloodied, and he held no Breath, but he seemed to be alive.

Can I stop both Denth and *Tonk Fah?* she thought. Her arms were tired. She had a couple of lengths of rope in her pocket she could Awaken. What if she threw and missed? She had seen Denth fight. He was faster than she'd thought possible. She would have to surprise him. And if she missed, she would die.

What am I doing? she thought. *Hanging from a wall, about to challenge two professional soldiers?*

Her recent past gave her the strength to push down her fear. They might kill her, but that would be a quick end. She'd survived betrayals, the death of a dear friend, and a time going mad from the illness, hunger, and terror of living on the streets. She'd been pushed down, forced to admit that she'd betrayed her people. There wasn't really any more they could do to her.

For some reason, those thoughts gave her power. Surprised at her own determination, she quietly recovered the Breath from her cloak and her leggings. She Awakened a pair of rope pieces, telling them to grab when thrown. She said a quiet prayer to Austre, then pulled herself up through the window and into the room.

Vasher was groaning. Tonk Fah was dozing in the corner. Denth, hold-

ing a bloody knife, looked up immediately as she landed. The look of utter shock on his face was, in itself, almost worth everything she'd been through. She tossed the rope at him, threw the other at Tonk Fah, then dashed into the room.

Denth reacted immediately, cutting the rope out of the air with his dagger. The pieces of it twisted and wriggled, but weren't long enough to grab anything. The one she threw at Tonk Fah, however, hit. He cried out, waking as it wrapped around his face and neck.

Vivenna pulled to a halt beside Vasher's swinging body. Denth had his sword out; he'd pulled it free more quickly than she could track. She gulped, then pulled out her own sword, holding it forward as Vasher had taught her. Denth paused just briefly in surprise.

That was enough. She swung—not for Denth, but for the rope holding Vasher to the ceiling. He fell with a grunt, and Denth struck, slamming the point of his dueling blade through her shoulder.

She fell, gasping in pain.

Denth stepped back. "Well, Princess," he said, warily holding his blade. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Tonk Fah made a gagging sound as the rope twisted around his neck, choking him. He struggled to pull it free with little success.

Once, the pain in her shoulder might have been debilitating. But after the beatings she'd taken on the street, it seemed somewhat familiar to her. She looked up, and met Denth's eyes.

"Was this supposed to be a rescue?" Denth asked. "Because honestly, I'm not very impressed."

Tonk Fah knocked over his stool in his thrashing. Denth glanced at him, then back at Vivenna. There was a moment of silence, save for Tonk Fah's weakening struggles. Finally, Denth cursed and jumped over to cut at the rope on his friend's neck.

"You all right?" Vasher asked from beside her. She was shocked by how solid his voice sounded, despite his bloodied body.

She nodded.

"They're going to send Lifeless marching on your homeland," he said. "We've been wrong about this all along. I don't know who's behind it, but I think they're winning the fight for the palace."

Denth finally got the rope cut free.

"You need to run," Vasher said, wiggling his hands free from their rope bonds. "Get back to your people, tell them not to fight the Lifeless. They need to flee through the northern passes, hide in the highlands. *Do not fight* or bring other kingdoms into the war."

Vivenna glanced back at Denth, who was smacking Tonk Fah back to consciousness. Then she closed her eyes. "Your Breath to mine," she said, drawing back the Breath from her hand tassels, adding it to the large amount she still held from before. She reached out, placing her hand on Vasher.

"Vivenna . . ." he said.

"My life to yours," she said. "My Breath become yours."

Her world became a thing of dullness. Beside her, Vasher gasped, then began to convulse at the bestowal of Breath. Denth stood up, spinning.

"You do it, Vasher," Vivenna whispered. "You'll be far better at it than I will be."

"Stubborn woman," Vasher said as he overcame the convulsions. He reached out, as if to restore her Breath to her, but noticed Denth.

Denth smiled, raising his blade. Vivenna put a hand to her shoulder, stopping the blood flow, and she began to push herself back toward the window—though, without Breath, she wasn't certain what she intended to do there.

Vasher stood up, taking her sword in his hand. He wore only the bloody, knee-length underbreeches, but his stance was firm. He slowly wrapped the rope he'd been hanging from around his waist, forming his characteristic belt.

How does he do it? she thought. *Where does his strength come from?*

"I should have hurt you more," Denth said. "I took my time. Savoring it too much."

Vasher snorted, tying off the belt. Denth seemed to be waiting, anticipating something.

"I've always found it funny that we bleed, just like ordinary men," Denth said. "We might be stronger, might live much longer, but we die just the same."

"Not the same," Vasher said, raising Vivenna's blade. "Other men die with far more honor than we, Denth."

Denth smiled. Vivenna could see excitement in his eyes. *He always claimed that there was no way Vasher could have beat his friend, Arsteel, in a duel,* she thought. *He wants to fight Vasher. He wants to prove to himself that Vasher isn't as good as he is.*

Blades whipped into motion. And after just a quick exchange, Vivenna could see that there was no contest. Denth was clearly the better. Perhaps it was Vasher's wounds. Perhaps it was the growing anger she saw in Vasher's eyes as he fought, marring his ability to be calm and collected during the fight. Maybe he just really wasn't as good as Denth. However, as Vivenna watched, she realized that Vasher was going to lose.

I didn't do all this so you could just die! she thought, rising to try to help.

A hand fell on her shoulder, pushing her back down. "I don't think so," Tonk Fah said, looming over her. "Nice trick with the rope, by the way. Very clever. I know a few tricks with ropes myself. Did you know, for instance, that a rope can be used to burn a person's flesh?" He smiled, then leaned down. "Mercenary humor, you see."

His cloak slid slightly off his shoulder, falling against her cheek.

It can't be, she thought. *I escaped from him. I tried to Awaken his cloak, but used a bad Command. Could he have been stupid enough to keep wearing it?*

She smiled, glancing over her shoulder. Vasher had backed against the far wall, to the window, and he was sweating profusely, bloody drops falling to the ground. Denth forced him back again, and Vasher stepped up on the table by the far wall, seeking high ground.

She looked back at Tonk Fah, his cloak still touching her cheek. "Your Breath to mine," she said.

She felt a sudden, welcoming burst of Breath.

"Huh?" Tonk Fah said.

"Nothing," she said. "Just . . . Attack and grab Denth!" Command made, visualization made, the cloak began to quiver. Tonk Fah's shirt drained of color, and his eyes widened with surprise. The cloak suddenly whipped into the air, yanking Tonk Fah to the side and causing him to stumble away from her.

That's why I'm the princess, and you're just a mercenary, she thought with satisfaction, rolling over.

Tonk Fah cried out. Denth spun at the sound, yelling as the very large, very uncoordinated Pahn Kahl man crashed into him, cloak whipping about.

Denth slammed backward, catching Vasher by surprise as they rammed together. Tonk Fah grunted. Denth cursed.

And Vasher was shoved backward out the window.

Vivenna blinked in surprise. That wasn't what she'd been intending. Denth cut away the cloak, pushing Tonk Fah back.

All was silent in the room for a moment.

"Go grab our squad of Lifeless!" Denth said. "Now!"

"You think he'll live?" Tonk Fah asked.

"He just fell out the third-story window, plummeting toward certain doom," Denth said. "Of course he'll live! Send the squad to the front doors to slow him!" Denth glanced at Vivenna. "You, Princess, are far more trouble than you're worth."

"So people are fond of telling me," she said with a sigh, raising her bloodied hand to her shoulder again, too exhausted to be as scared as she probably should be.

VASHER FELL toward the hard stone blocks below. He watched the window retreat above him. *Almost,* he thought with frustration. *I just about had him!*

Wind whistled. He screamed in frustration, pulling free the rope at his waist, Vivenna's Breath a lively strength within him.

"Grab things," he Commanded, whipping the rope out, drawing color from his bloodstained shorts. They bled to grey, and the rope wrapped around an outcropping of stone on the palace wall. It pulled taut, and he ran sideways along the ebony blocks, slowing his fall.

"Your Breath to mine," he yelled as his momentum slowed. The rope dropped free and he landed on the first block. "Become as my leg and give it strength!" he Commanded, drawing color from the blood on his chest. The rope twisted down, wrapping around his leg and foot as he leaped off. He landed on the next block, one foot down, the coiled rope—and its strange, inhuman muscles—bearing the brunt of the shock.

Four hops and he hit the ground. A group of soldiers stood amidst some bodies at the front gates, looking confused. Vasher barreled toward them, colorless translucent blood dropping from his skin as he drew his Breath back from the rope.

He scooped a sword from a fallen soldier. The men before the gates turned and readied their weapons. He didn't have the time, or the patience,

for pleasantries. He struck, cutting men down with quick efficiency. He wasn't as good as Denth, but he had practiced for a very, very long time.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of men. Maybe too many to fight. Vasher cursed, spinning between them, dropping another one. He bent down, slapping his hand against the waist of a fallen soldier, touching both shirt and pants, looping his finger around the colored inner undershirt.

"Fight for me, as if you were me," he Commanded, draining the man's undershirt completely grey. Vasher spun, blocking a sword strike. Another came from the side, and another. He couldn't block them all.

A sword flashed in the air, blocking a weapon that would have hit Vasher. The dead man's shirt and trousers, having pulled themselves free, stood holding a blade. They struck, as if controlled by an invisible person inside, blocking and attacking with skill. Vasher put his back to the Awakened construct. When he had a chance, he made another one, draining away his remaining Breath.

They fought in a trio, Vasher and his two sets of Awakened clothing. The guards cursed, much more wary now. Vasher eyed them, planning an attack. At that moment, a troop of some fifty Lifeless barreled around the corner, charging toward him.

Colors! Vasher thought. He growled in rage, striking and taking down another soldier.

Colors, Colors, Colors!

You shouldn't swear, a voice said in his head. *Shashara told me that was evil.*

Vasher spun toward the sound. A little line of black smoke was trailing out from beneath the closed front doors of the palace.

Aren't you going to thank me? Nightblood said. *I came to save you.*

One of his sets of clothing fell, the leg cut off by soldier's clever strike. Vasher reached back, drawing the Breath back from the second set of clothing, then stepped with an unclothed toe on the fallen set, recovering the Breath from it as well. The soldiers backed away, wary, more than happy to let the Lifeless take him.

And in that moment of peace, Vasher charged for the gates to the palace. He threw his shoulder against them, slamming them open, skidding into the entryway.

A large group of men lay dead on the ground. Nightblood sprouted from one man's chest, as usual, hilt pointing toward the sky. Vasher hesitated only briefly. He could hear Lifeless charging up behind him.

He ran forward and grabbed Nightblood's hilt and pulled the sword free, leaving the sheath behind in the body.

The blade sprayed a wave of black liquid as he swung it. The liquid dissolved into smoke before touching walls or floor, like water in an oven. Smoke twisted, some rising from the blade, some falling in a stream to the floor, dripping like black blood.

Destroy! Nightblood's voice boomed in his head. *The evil must be destroyed!* Pain shot up Vasher's arm, and he felt his Breath being leached away, sucked into the blade, fueling its hunger. Drawing the weapon had a terrible cost. At that moment, he didn't really care. He spun toward the charging Lifeless and—enraged—attacked.

Each creature he struck with the blade immediately flashed and became smoke. A single scratch and the bodies dissolved like paper being consumed by an invisible fire, leaving behind only a large stain of blackness in the air. Vasher spun among them, striking with wrath, killing Lifeless after Lifeless. Black smoke churned around him, and his arm twisted with pain as veinlike tendrils climbed up the hilt and around his forearm—like black blood vessels that latched on to his skin, feeding off his Breath.

In a matter of minutes, the Breath Vivenna had given him had been reduced by half. Yet in those moments, he destroyed all fifty Lifeless. The soldiers outside pulled to a halt, watching the display. Vasher stood amidst a churning mass of deep ebony smoke. It slowly rose into the air, the only remnants of the fifty creatures he had destroyed.

The soldiers ran away.

Vasher screamed, charging toward the side of the room. He slammed Nightblood through a wall. The stone dissolved just as easily as flesh had, evaporating away before him. He burst through the dissipating black smoke, entering the next room. He didn't bother with a stairwell. He simply jumped onto a table and rammed Nightblood into the ceiling.

A circle ten feet wide vanished. Dark, mistlike smoke fell around him like streaks of paint. He Awakened his rope again then tossed it up, using it to pull himself up onto the next floor. A moment later, he did it again, climbing onto the third floor.

He spun, slashing through walls, bellowing as he ran back toward Denth. The pain in his arm was incredible, and his Breath was draining away at an alarming rate. Once it was gone, Nightblood would kill him.

Everything was growing fuzzy. He slashed through a final wall, finding the room where he had been tortured.

It was empty.

He cried out, arm shaking. *Destroy . . . evil . . .* Nightblood said in his mind, all lightness gone from the tone, all familiarity. It boomed like a command. An awful, inhuman thing. The longer Vasher held the sword, the faster it drained his Breath.

Gasping, he threw the sword aside and fell to his knees. It skidded, tearing a rip in the floor that puffed away into smoke, but hit a wall with a pling and fell still. Smoke rose from the blade.

Vasher knelt, arm twitching. The black veins on his skin slowly evaporated. He was left with just barely enough Breath to reach the First Heightening. Another few seconds, and Nightblood would have sucked the rest away. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

Something fell to the tiled floor in front of him. A dueling blade. Vasher looked up.

"Stand up," Denth said, eyes hard. "We're going to finish what we started."

57

Bluefingers led Siri—held by several Lifeless—up to the fourth floor of the palace. The top floor. They entered a room lavishly decorated with rich colors, even for Hallandren. Lifeless guards there let them pass, bowing their heads to Bluefingers.

All the Lifeless in the city are controlled by Bluefingers and his scribes, she thought. *But even before that, the scribes had great power over the bureaucracy and workings of the kingdom. Did the Hallandren realize that they were dooming themselves by relegating the Pahn Kahl people to such lowly—yet important—positions?*

"My people will not fall for this," Siri found herself saying as she was pulled to the front of the room. "They won't fight Hallandren. They'll retreat through the passes. Take refuge in the highland valleys or one of the outer kingdoms."

The front of the room held a black block of stone, shaped like an altar. Siri frowned. From behind, a group of Lifeless entered the room, carrying the corpses of several priests. She saw Treledees's body among them.

What? Siri thought.

Bluefingers turned toward her. "We'll make certain they're angry," he said. "Trust me. When this is through, Princess, Idris will fight until either it or Hallandren is destroyed."

They tossed someone into the cell next to Lightsong. He looked up with weary eyes, uncaring. It was another Returned. Which of the gods had they taken captive now?

The God King, he thought. *Interesting.*

He looked down again. What did it matter? He'd failed Blushweaver. He'd failed everyone. The Lifeless armies were probably already marching on Idris. Hallandren and Idris would fight and the Pahn Kahl would have their revenge. It had been three hundred years coming.

Vasher stood up with difficulty. He held the dueling sword in a weak hand, looking at Denth, still shaken by his use of Nightblood. The empty black hallway was now open around them. Vasher had destroyed several of the walls. It was amazing the roof hadn't fallen in.

Corpses littered the floor, the result of the fights when Denth's men had taken over the palace.

"I'll let you die easily," Denth said, raising his blade. "Just tell me the truth. You never beat Arsteel in a duel, did you?"

Vasher raised his own blade. The cuts, the pain in his arm, the exhaustion of being awake so long . . . it was all wearing on him. Adrenaline could only get him so far, and even *his* body could only take so much. He didn't reply.

"Have it your way," Denth said, attacking.

Vasher backed away, forced to the defensive. Denth had always been better at swordplay. Vasher had been better at research, but what had that earned him? Discoveries that had caused the Manywar, an army of monsters that had killed so many.

He fought. He fought well, he knew, considering how tired he was. But it did little good. Denth drove his blade through Vasher's left shoulder—Denth's favorite place for a first strike. It allowed his opponent to keep fighting, wounded, and drew out the fight for Denth's enjoyment.

"You *never* beat Arsteel," Denth whispered.

"YOU'RE GOING TO KILL me on an altar," Siri said, standing in the strange room, held by Lifeless. Around her, other Lifeless placed bodies on the floor. Priests. "It doesn't make sense, Bluefingers. You don't follow their religion. Why do this?"

Bluefingers stood to the side, holding a knife. She could see the shame in his eyes. "Bluefingers," she said, forcing her voice to remain even, her hair to stay black. "Bluefingers, you don't have to do this."

Bluefingers finally looked at her. "After all I've already done, do you think one more death means anything to me?"

"After all you've done," she said, "do you really think one more death will matter for your cause?"

He glanced at the altar. "Yes," he said. "You know how the Idrians whisper of the things that go on in the Court of Gods. Your people hate and distrust the Hallandren priests; they speak of murders done on dark altars in the backs of the palaces. Well, we are going to let a group of those Idrian mercenaries see this, once you are dead. We'll show them that we were too late to save you, that the twisted priests had already killed you on one of their profane altars. We'll show them the dead priests we killed trying to save you.

"The Idrians will riot in the city. They're strained to snapping anyway—we have you to thank for that. The city will be in chaos, and there will be a slaughter the like of which hasn't been seen since the Manywar as the Hallandren kill Idrian peasants to maintain order. Those Idrians that live will return to their homeland to tell the tale. They'll let everyone know that the Hallandren only wanted a princess of the royal blood so that they could sacrifice her to their God King. It is exaggerated and foolish to think that the Hallandren would really do such a thing, but sometimes the wildest tales are the ones best believed, and the Idrians will accept this one. You know they will."

And she did. She'd heard similar stories since her childhood. Hallandren was remote to her people: frightening, bizarre. Siri struggled, feeling even more worried.

Bluefingers glanced back at her. "I truly am sorry."

I AM NOTHING, Lightsong thought. *Why couldn't I save her? Why couldn't I protect her?*

He was crying again. Oddly, someone else was too. The man in the cell next to him. The God King. Susebron moaned with frustration, pounding against the bars of his cage. He didn't speak, though, or denounce his captors.

I wonder why that is, Lightsong thought.

Men approached the God King's cell. Pahn Kahl men, with weapons. Their expressions were grim.

Lightsong found it hard to care.

You are a god. Llarimar's words still challenged him. The high priest lay in his own cell, to Lightsong's left, eyes closed against the terrors around them.

You are a god. To me at least.

Lightsong shook his head. *No. I'm nothing! No god. Not even a good man.*

You are . . . to me . . .

Water splashed against him. Lightsong shook his head, shocked. Thunder sounded, distant, in his head. Nobody else seemed to notice.

It was growing dark.

What?

He was on a ship. Tossing, pitching, on a dark sea. Lightsong stood on the deck, trying to stay upright on the slick boards. Part of him knew it was simply a hallucination, that he was still back in the prison cell, but it felt real. Very real.

The waves churned, black sky ripped by lightning ahead, and the ship's motion slammed his face against the wall of the ship's cabin. Light from a pole-mounted lantern flickered uncertainly. It seemed weak compared with the lightning, which was so violent and angry.

Lightsong blinked. His face was pressed up against something painted on the wood. A red panther, glistening in the lanternlight and the rain.

The name of the ship, he remembered, *the* Red Panther.

He wasn't Lightsong. Or he was, but he was a much smaller, pudgier version of himself. A man accustomed to being a scribe. To working long hours counting coins. Checking ledgers.

Seeking for lost money. That's what he'd done. People hired him to discover where they'd been cheated or if a contract hadn't been paid properly. His job was to look through the books, searching out hidden or confusing twists of arithmetic. A detective. Just not the sort he had imagined.

Waves crashed against the boat. Llarimar, looking a few years younger, yelled for help from the prow. Deckhands rushed to his aid. It wasn't

Llarimar's ship, or even Lightsong's. They had borrowed it for a simple pleasure trip. Sailing was a hobby of Llarimar's.

The storm had come on suddenly. Lightsong lurched back to his feet, barely managing to stay up as he made his way forward, clutching the railing. Waves surged across the deck, and sailors struggled to keep the boat from capsizing. The sails were gone, only tattered shreds remaining. Wood creaked and cracked around him. Dark, black water churned in the ocean just to his right.

Llarimar yelled to Lightsong, asking him to lash down the barrels. Lightsong nodded, grabbing a rope and tying one end to a davit. A wave hit, and he skidded, almost falling over the rail into the water.

He froze, gripping the rope, looking into the sea's mad, terrifying depths. He shook himself free, then tied the rope in a wide slipknot. It came naturally to him. Llarimar had taken him on enough sailing trips now.

Llarimar called for help again. And, suddenly, a young woman left the cabin and ran across the deck, grabbing ropes as if to lend assistance. "Tatara!" a woman called from the cabin. There was terror in her voice.

Lightsong looked up. He recognized the girl. He reached out, rope looped in his hands. He shouted for her to go back below, but his voice was lost in the thunder.

She turned to look at him.

The next wave tossed her into the ocean.

Llarimar cried out in despair. Lightsong watched, shocked. The deep blackness claimed his niece. Engulfed her. Swallowed her.

Such great, horrible chaos. The sea in a storm at night. He felt useless, his heart thumping with fright as he watched the young woman get swept into the churning current. He saw flashes of her golden hair twisting in the water. A weak splash of color passing his side of the ship. It would soon be gone.

Men cursed. Llarimar screamed. A woman wept. Lightsong just stared into the bubbling deep, with its alternating froth and blackness. The terrible, terrible blackness.

He still held the rope in his hand.

Without thinking, he leaped up onto the railing and threw himself into the darkness. Icy water took him, but he reached out, thrashing and churning in the tempest. He barely knew how to swim. Something passed him.

He grabbed it. Her foot. He threw the loop around her ankle, somehow managing to get the knot tight despite the water and the waves. As soon as he

did, a surge in the undulating water yanked him away. Sucking him down. He reached upward, toward where lighting lit the surface. That light grew distant as he sank.

Down. Into the black deep.

Claimed by the void.

He blinked, waves and thunder fading. He sat on the cool stones of his cell. The void had taken him, but something had sent him back. He'd Returned.

Because he'd seen war and destruction.

The God King was yelling in fear. Lightsong looked over as the fake priests grabbed Susebron, and Lightsong could see into the God King's mouth. *No tongue,* Lightsong thought. *Of course. To keep him from using all that BioChroma. It makes sense.*

He turned to the side. Blushweaver's body lay red and bloodied. He'd seen that it in a vision. In the vague shadows of morning memory, he'd thought that the image had been of her blushing, but now he remembered. He looked to the side. Llarimar, eyes closed as if asleep—that image had been in his dream as well. Lightsong realized the man had them shut as he wept.

The God King in prison. Lightsong had seen that too. But above it all, he remembered standing on the other side of a brilliant, colorful wave of light, looking down at the world from the other side. And seeing everything he loved dissolve into the destruction of war. A war greater than any the world had known, a war more deadly—even—than the Manywar.

He remembered the other side. And he remembered a voice, calm and comforting, offering him an opportunity.

To Return.

By the Colors . . . Lightsong thought, standing up as the priests forced the God King to his knees. *I* am *a god.*

Lightsong stepped forward, moving up to the bars of his cage. He saw pain and tears in the God King's face and somehow understood them. The man *did* love Siri. Lightsong had seen the same thing in the queen's eyes. She had somehow come to care for the man who was to oppress her.

"You are my king," Lightsong whispered. "And lord of the gods."

The Pahn Kahl men forced the God King facedown on the stones. One of the priests raised a sword. The God King's arm jutted out, his hand toward Lightsong.

I have seen the void, he thought. *And I came back.*

And then Lightsong reached through the bars and grasped the God King's hand. A fake priest looked up with alarm.

Lightsong met the man's eyes, then smiled broadly, looking down at the God King. "My life to yours," Lightsong said. "My Breath become yours."

DENTH SLASHED, wounding Vasher in the leg.

Vasher stumbled, going down on one knee. Denth struck again, and Vasher barely managed to keep the sword away.

Denth backed off, shaking his head. "You are pathetic, Vasher. There you kneel, about to die. And you still think you're better than the rest of us. You judge me for becoming a mercenary? What else was I to do? Take over kingdoms? Rule them and start wars, as you did?"

Vasher bowed his head. Denth growled and ran forward, lashing out with his sword. Vasher tried to defend himself, but he was just too weak. Denth knocked Vasher's weapon aside, then kicked him in the stomach, sending Vasher backward against the wall.

Vasher slumped down, sword lost. He reached for a knife on the belt of a fallen soldier, but Denth stepped up and put his booted foot on Vasher's hand.

"You think I should just go back to the way I was before?" Denth spat. "The happy, friendly man everyone loved?"

"You were a good person," Vasher whispered.

"That man saw and did terrible things," Denth said. "I've tried, Vasher. I've *tried* going back. But the darkness . . . it's inside. I can't escape it. My laughter has an edge to it. I can't forget."

"I can make you," Vasher said. "I know the Commands."

Denth froze.

"I promise," Vasher said. "I will take it all from you, if you wish."

Denth stood for a long moment, foot on Vasher's arm, sword lowered. Then, finally, he shook his head. "No. I don't deserve that. Neither of us do. Goodbye, Vasher."

He raised his blade to strike. And Vasher moved his arm up, touching Denth's leg.

"My life to yours, my Breath become yours."

Denth froze, then stumbled. Fifty Breaths fled from Vasher's chest and surged into Denth's body. They would be unwelcome, but he couldn't turn them away. Fifty Breaths. Not many.

But enough. Enough to make Denth shake with pleasure. Enough to make him lose control for just a second, falling to his knees. And, in that second, Vasher stood—ripping the dagger free from the corpse beside him—then slashed it through Denth's throat.

The mercenary fell back, eyes wide, neck bleeding. He shook amidst the pleasure of gaining new Breaths even as his life flowed from him.

"Nobody ever expects it," Vasher whispered, stepping forward. "Breath is worth a fortune. To put it into someone, then kill them, is to lose more wealth than most men will ever know. They never expect it."

Denth shook, bleeding, and lost control. His hair suddenly bled to deep black, then blond, then an angry red.

Finally, the hair turned white with terror and stayed there. He stopped moving, life fading away, new Breaths and old both vanishing.

"You wanted to know how I killed Arsteel," Vasher said, spitting blood to the side. "Well, now you do."

Bluefingers picked up a knife. "The least I can do," he decided, "is to kill you myself, rather than letting the Lifeless do it. I promise it will be quick. We will make it look like a pagan ritual afterward, sparing you the need to die in a painful way." He turned to her Lifeless captors. "Tie her to the altar."

Siri struggled against the Lifeless holding her by the shoulders, but it was useless. They were terribly strong, and her hands were tied together. "Bluefingers!" she snapped, holding his eyes. "I will *not* die tied to some rock like a useless maid from one of the stories. You want me dead, then have the decency to let me die standing up."

Bluefingers hesitated, but the authority in her voice actually seemed to make him cringe. He raised a hand, stopping the Lifeless as they pulled her to the altar.

"Very well," he said. "Hold her tightly."

"You realize the wonderful opportunity you waste by killing me," she

said as he approached. "The wife of the God King would make a wonderful hostage. You are a fool to kill me, and . . ."

He ignored her this time, taking the knife, placing it against her chest, picking his spot. She started to feel numb. She was going to die. She was actually going to *die*.

And the war would start.

"Please," she whispered.

He looked at her, hesitated, then grew grim and drew back the dagger.

The building began to shake.

Bluefingers looked to the side in alarm, glancing toward several of his scribes. They shook their heads in confusion.

"Earthquake?" one asked.

The floor began to turn white. The color moved like a wave of sunlight crossing the land as the sun rose above the mountains. The walls, the ceiling, the floor—all of the black stone faded. The priests stepped away from it, looking frightened, one hopping onto a rug to keep from touching the strange white stones.

Bluefingers looked at her, confused. The ground continued to tremble, but he raised his blade anyway, held in fingers that had been stained repeatedly by ink. And, strangely, Siri saw the whites of his eyes bend and release a rainbow of colors.

The entire room burst with color, the white stones fuzzing and splitting, like light through a prism. The doors to the room exploded. A twisting mass of colorful cloths shot through it, like the countless tentacles of an enraged sea leviathan. They churned and curled, and Siri recognized tapestries, carpets, and long lengths of silk from the palace decorations.

Awakened cloth slapped aside Lifeless, curling around them, tossing them into the air. Priests cried out as they were snatched up, and a long, thin length of violet cloth snapped forward and wrapped around Bluefingers's arm.

The surging mass undulated, churning, and Siri could finally see a figure walking in the middle of it. A man of epic proportions. Black of hair, pale of face, youthful in appearance, but of great age. Bluefingers struggled to ram his knife into Siri's chest, but the God King raised a hand.

"You will *stop*!" Susebron said in a clear voice.

Bluefingers froze, looking toward the God King in amazement. The dag-

ger slipped from his stunned fingers as an Awakened carpet twisted around him, pulling him away from Siri.

Siri stood, dumbfounded. Susebron's cloths lifted him up and over beside her, and a pair of small silken handkerchiefs reached forward, sliding around the ropes binding her hands, untying them with ease.

Freed, she grabbed him and let him lift her into his arms, weeping.

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The closet door opened, letting in lanternlight. Vivenna looked up, gagged and bound, at Vasher's silhouette. He dragged Nightblood behind him, covered—as usual—by his silver sheath.

Looking very tired, Vasher knelt and undid her gag.

"About time," she noted.

He smiled wanly. "I don't have any Breath remaining," he said quietly. "It was very hard to locate you."

"Where did it all go?" she asked as he undid the ropes on her hands.

"Nightblood devoured most of it."

I don't believe him, Nightblood said happily. *I . . . can't really remember what happened. But we did slay a lot of evil!*

"You drew him?" Vivenna asked as Vasher untied her feet.

Vasher nodded.

Vivenna rubbed her hands. "Denth?"

"Dead," Vasher said. "No sign of Tonk Fah or the woman, Jewels. I think they took their money and fled."

"So it's over."

Vasher nodded, sliding down to seat himself, resting his head against the wall. "And we lost."

She frowned, grimacing at the pain of her wounded shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Denth was being employed by some of the Pahn Kahl scribes in the

palace," Vasher said. "They wanted to start a war between Idris and Hallandren in the hope that it would weaken both kingdoms and let Pahn Kahl gain independence."

"So? Denth is dead now."

"So are the scribes who had the Command phrases for the Lifeless armies," Vasher said. "And they already dispatched the troops. The Lifeless left the city over an hour ago, charging for Idris."

Vivenna fell silent.

"All of this fighting, everything with Denth, that was secondary," Vasher said, knocking his head back against the wall. "It distracted us. I couldn't get to the Lifeless in time. The war has begun. There's no way to stop it."

Susebron led Siri down into the depths of the palace. Siri walked beside him, carefully cradled in his arm, a hundred twisting lengths of cloth spinning around them.

Even with that many things Awakened, he still had enough Breath to make every color they passed glow brightly. Of course, that didn't work for many of the stones they passed. Though large chunks of the building were still black, at least half of it had been turned white.

Not just the grey of normal Awakening. They had been made bone white. And, becoming that white, they now reacted to his incredible BioChroma, splitting back into colors. *Like a circle, somehow,* she thought. *Colorful, then white, then back to color.*

He led her into a particular chamber, and she saw what he'd told her to expect. Scribes crushed by the carpets that he'd awakened, bars ripped from their mountings, walls broken down. A ribbon shot from Susebron, turning over a body so that she wouldn't have to see its wound. She wasn't paying much attention. In the midst of the rubble were a pair of corpses. One was Blushweaver, bloody and red, facedown. The other was Lightsong, his entire body drained of color. As if he were a Lifeless.

His eyes were closed, and he seemed to sleep, as if at peace. A man sat next to him—Lightsong's high priest, holding the god's head in his lap.

The priest looked up. He smiled, though she could see tears in his eyes.

"I don't understand," she said, looking at Susebron.

"Lightsong gave his life to heal me," the God King said. "He somehow knew that my tongue had been removed."

"The Returned can heal one person," the priest said, looking down at his god. "It's their duty to decide who and when. They come back for this purpose, some say. To give life to one person who needs it."

"I never knew him," Susebron said.

"He was a very good person," Siri said.

"I realize that. Though I never spoke to him, somehow he was noble enough to die so that I might live."

The priest smiled down. "The amazing thing is," he said, "Lightsong did that twice."

He told me that I couldn't depend on him in the end, Siri thought, smiling slightly, though sorrowful at the same time. *I guess he lied about that. How very like him.*

"Come," Susebron said. "We must gather what is left of my priests. We have to find a way to stop our armies from destroying your people."

"THERE HAS TO BE a way, Vasher," Vivenna said. She knelt next to him.

He tried to push down his rage, his anger at himself. He'd come to the city to stop a war. Once again, he'd been too late.

"Forty thousand Lifeless," he said, pounding his fist against the floor. "I can't stop that many. Not even with Nightblood and the Breaths of every person in the city. Even if I could somehow keep up with their marching, one would eventually get in a lucky strike and kill me."

"There *has* to be a way," Vivenna said.

Has to be a way.

"I thought the same thing before," he said, putting his head in his hands. "I wanted to stop it. But by the time I realized what was happening, it had gone too far. It had taken on a life of its own."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Manywar," Vasher whispered.

Silence.

"Who *are* you?"

He kept his eyes closed.

They used to call him Talaxin, Nightblood said.

"Talaxin," Vivenna said, amused. "Nightblood, that's one of the Five Scholars. He . . ."

She trailed off.

". . . he lived over three hundred years ago," she finally said.

"BioChroma can keep a man alive a long time," Vasher said, sighing and opening his eyes. She didn't argue.

They used to call him other things, too, Nightblood said.

"If you're really one of them," Vivenna said, "then you'll know how to stop the Lifeless."

"Sure," Vasher said wryly. "With other Lifeless."

"That's it?"

"The easiest. Barring that, we can chase them down and grab them one at a time, then break them and replace their Command phrases. But even if you had the Eighth Heightening to let you break Commands instinctively, changing so many would take weeks."

He shook his head. "We could have an army fight them, but they *are* our army. The Hallandren forces aren't large enough to fight the Lifeless on their own, and they wouldn't be able to get to Idris with any semblance of speed. The Lifeless will beat them by days. Lifeless don't sleep, don't eat, and can march tirelessly."

"Ichor-alcohol," Vivenna said. "They'll run out."

"It's not like food, Vivenna. It's like blood. They need a new supply if they get cut and drained or if it gets corrupted. A few will probably stop working without maintenance, but only a small number."

She fell silent. "Well then, we Awaken an army of our own to fight them."

He smiled wanly. He felt so light-headed. He'd bound his wounds—the bad ones, anyway—but he wouldn't be doing more fighting anytime soon. Vivenna didn't look much better, with that bloody stain on her shoulder.

"Awaken an army of our own?" he said. "First, where would we get the Breath? I used all of yours. Even if we find my clothing, which still has some in it, we'll only have a couple hundred. It takes one per Lifeless. We're severely overmatched."

"The God King," she said.

"Can't use his Breath," Vasher said. "The man's tongue was removed when he was a child."

"And you can't get it out of him somehow?"

Vasher shrugged. "The Tenth Heightening allows a man to Command mentally, without speaking, but it can take months of training to learn how to do that—even if you have someone to teach you. I think his priests must know how, so they can transfer that wealth of Breath from one king to another, but I doubt they've trained him yet. One of their duties is to keep him from using his Breaths in the first place."

"He's still our best option," Vivenna said.

"Oh? And you'll use his power how? Make Lifeless? Are you forgetting that we'll need to find *forty thousand* bodies?"

She sighed, resting back against the wall.

Vasher? Nightblood asked in his mind. *Didn't you leave an army behind here last time?*

He didn't reply. Vivenna opened her eyes, however. Apparently Nightblood had decided to include her in all of his thoughts now.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Nothing," Vasher said.

No, no it's not, Nightblood said. *I remember. You talked to that priest, told him to take care of your Breath for you, should you need it again. And you gave him your army. It stopped moving. You called it a gift for the city. Don't you remember? It was just yesterday.*

"Yesterday?" Vivenna asked.

When the Manywar stopped, Nightblood said. *When was that?*

"He doesn't understand time," Vasher said. "Don't listen to him."

"No," Vivenna said, studying him. "He knows something." She thought for a moment, then her eyes opened wide. "Kalad's army," she said, pointing at him. "His phantoms. You know where they are!"

He hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

"Where?"

"Here, in the city."

"We have to use them!"

He eyed her. "You're asking me to give Hallandren a tool, Vivenna. A terrible tool. Something worse than what they have now."

"And if that army of theirs slaughters my people?" Vivenna asked. "Could what you're talking about give them more power than that?"

"Yes."

She fell silent.

"Do it anyway," she said.

He glanced at her.

"Please, Vasher."

He closed his eyes again, remembering the destruction he had caused. The wars that had started. All because of the things he'd learned to create. "You would give your enemies such power?"

"They're not my enemies," she said. "Even if I hate them."

He regarded her for a moment, then finally stood. "Let's find the God King. If he even still lives, then we shall see."

"My lord and lady," said the priest, bowing with his face down before them. "We heard rumors of a plot to attack the palace. That's why we locked you away. We wanted to protect you!"

Siri looked at the man, then glanced at Susebron. The God King rubbed his chin in thought. They both recognized this man as one of his actual priests, rather than an impostor. They'd only been able to determine that with certainty for a handful of them.

They imprisoned the others, sending for the city guard to come in and start cleaning up the wreckage of the palace. The breeze blew Siri's hair—red, to show her displeasure—as they stood atop the palace.

"There, my lord!" a guard said, pointing.

Susebron turned, walking over to the edge of the palace. Most of his entourage of twisting cloths were no longer streaming about him, but they waited on his will in a pile on the rooftop. Siri joined him at the side of the palace, and in the distance, she could make out a smudge and what looked like smoke.

"The Lifeless army," the guard said. "Our scouts have confirmed that it's marching toward Idris. Almost everyone in the city saw it pass out through the gates."

"That smoke?" Siri asked.

"Dust of its passing, my lady," the guard said. "That's a lot of soldiers."

She looked up at Susebron. He frowned. "I could stop them." His voice was stronger than she had expected it to be. Deeper.

"My lord?" the guard asked.

"With this much Breath," Susebron said. "I could charge them, use these cloths to tie them up."

"My lord," the guard said hesitantly. "There are *forty thousand* of them. They would cut at the cloth, overwhelm you."

Susebron seemed resolute. "I have to try."

"No," Siri said, laying a hand on his chest.

"Your people . . ."

"We'll send messengers," she said, "explaining our regret. My people can withdraw, ambush the Lifeless. We can send troops to help."

"We don't have many," he said. "And they won't get there very quickly. Could your people really get away?"

No, she thought, heart wrenching. *You don't know that, though, and you're innocent enough to believe they can escape.*

Her people might survive as a whole, but many would die. Susebron getting himself killed fighting the creatures wouldn't be of much use, however. He had amazing power, but fighting so many Lifeless was well beyond the scope of whatever he could do.

He saw the look in her face, and surprisingly, he read it well. "You don't believe that they can get away," he said. "You're just trying to protect me."

Surprising how well he understands me already.

"My lord!" a voice said from behind.

Susebron turned, looking across the top of the palace. They'd come to the top partially to get a look at the Lifeless, but also because both Siri and Susebron were tired of being closed in tight quarters. They wanted to be in the open, where it would be harder to sneak up on them.

A guard came out of the stairwell, then walked over, hand on sword. He bowed. "My lord. There's someone here to see you."

"I don't want to see anyone," Susebron said. "Who are they?"

Amazing how well he can speak, she thought. *Never having had a tongue. What did Lightsong's Breath do? It healed more than his body. It gave him the capacity to use the regrown tongue.*

"My lord," the guard said. "The visitor—she has the Royal Locks!"

"What?" Siri asked with surprise.

The guard turned, and—shockingly—Vivenna stepped up onto the roof of the palace. Or Siri *thought* it was Vivenna. She wore trousers and a tunic, with a sword tied at her waist, and she appeared to have a bloody wound on one shoulder. She saw Siri, and smiled, her hair turning yellow with joy.

Vivenna's hair changing? Siri thought. *It can't be her.*

But it was. The woman laughed, dashing across the top of the roof. Some guards stopped her, but Siri waved for them to let the woman pass. She ran over, embracing Siri.

"Vivenna?"

The woman smiled ruefully. "Yes, mostly," she said. She glanced at Susebron. "I'm sorry," Vivenna said quietly. "I came to the city to try rescuing you."

"That was very kind of you," Siri said. "But I don't need rescuing."

Vivenna frowned more deeply.

"And who is this, Siri?" Susebron asked.

"My eldest sister."

"Ah," Susebron said, bowing his head cordially. "Siri has told me much about you, Princess Vivenna. I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

Vivenna stared at the man with shock.

"He's not really as bad as they say," Siri said, smiling. "Most of the time."

"That is sarcasm," Susebron said. "She is quite fond of it."

Vivenna turned from the God King. "Our homeland is under attack."

"I know," Siri said. "We're working on that. I'm preparing messengers to send to Father."

"I have a better way," Vivenna said. "But you'll have to trust me."

"Of course," Siri said.

"I have a friend who needs to speak with the God King," Vivenna said. "Where he can't be overheard by guards."

Siri hesitated. *Silly,* she thought. *This is Vivenna. I can trust her.*

She'd thought she could trust Bluefingers too. Vivenna regarded her with a curious expression.

"If this can help save Idris," Susebron said, "then I will do it. Who is this person?"

MOMENTS LATER, Vivenna stood quietly on the roof of the palace with the God King of Hallandren. Siri stood a short walk away, watching the Lifeless churn dust in the distance. All of them waited while the soldiers searched Vasher for weapons; he stood with arms upraised on the other side of the rooftop, surrounded by suspicious guards. He had wisely left Nightblood below and didn't have any other weapons on him. He didn't even have any Breath.

"Your sister is an amazing woman," the God King said.

Vivenna glanced at him. This was the man she was to have married. The terrible creature that she was supposed to have given herself to. She'd never expected to end up like this, pleasantly chatting with him.

She'd also never expected that she'd like him.

It was a quick judgment. She'd gotten over chastising herself for making those, though she had learned to leave them open for revision. She saw kindness in his fondness for Siri. How had a man like this ended up as God King of terrible Hallandren?

"Yes," she said. "She is."

"I love her," Susebron said. "I would have you know this."

Slowly, Vivenna nodded, glancing over at Siri. *She's changed so much,* Vivenna thought. *When did she become so regal, with that commanding bearing and ability to keep her hair black?* Her little sister, no longer quite as little, seemed to wear the expensive dress well. It fit her. Odd.

On the other end of the rooftop, the guards took Vasher behind a screen to change. They obviously wanted to be certain none of his clothing was Awakened. He left a few moments later, wearing a wrap around his waist, but nothing else. His chest was cut and bruised, and Vivenna thought it shameful that he should be forced to undergo such humiliation.

He suffered it, walking across the rooftop with an escort. As he did, Siri walked back, eyes watching him keenly. Vivenna had spoken with her sister briefly, but could already tell that Siri no longer took pride in being unimportant. Changed indeed.

Vasher arrived, and Susebron dismissed the guards. Behind him, the jungles extended to the north, toward Idris. Vasher glanced at Vivenna, and she

thought he might tell her to go. However, he finally just turned away from her, looking resigned.

"Who are you?" Susebron asked.

"The one responsible for you getting your tongue cut out," Vasher said.

Susebron raised an eyebrow.

Vasher closed his eyes. He didn't speak, didn't use his Breath or make a Command. Yet suddenly, he started to glow. Not as a lantern would glow, not as the sun glowed, but with an aura that made colors brighter. Vivenna started as Vasher increased in size. He opened his eyes and adjusted the wrap at his waist, making room for his growth. His chest became more firm, the muscles bulging, and the scruffy beard on his face retreated, leaving him clean-shaven.

His hair turned golden. He still bore the cuts on his body, but they seemed inconsequential. He seemed . . . divine. The God King watched with interest. He was now faced by a fellow god, a man of his own stature.

"I don't care if you believe me or not," Vasher said, his voice sounding more noble. "But I will have you know that I left something here, long ago. A wealth of power that I promised to one day recover. I gave instructions for its care, and a charge that it should not be used. The priests, apparently, took this to heart."

Susebron, surprisingly, dropped to one knee. "My lord. Where have you been?"

"Paying for what I've done," Vasher said. "Or trying to. That is unimportant. Stand."

What is going on? Vivenna thought. Siri looked equally confused, and the sisters shared a look.

Susebron stood, though he kept his posture reverent.

"You have a group of rogue Lifeless," Vasher said. "You've lost control of them."

"I'm sorry, my lord," the God King said.

Vasher regarded him. Then he glanced at Vivenna. She nodded her head. "I trust him."

"It's not about trust," Vasher said, turning back to Susebron. "Either way, I am going to give you something."

"What?"

"My army," Vasher said.

Susebron frowned. "But, my lord. Our Lifeless just marched away, to attack Idris."

"No," Vasher said. "Not that army. I'm going to give you the one I left behind three hundred years ago. The people call them Kalad's Phantoms. They are the force by which I made Hallandren stop its war."

"Stop the Manywar, my lord?" Susebron said. "You did that by negotiation."

Vasher snorted. "You don't know much about war, do you?"

The God King paused, then shook his head. "No."

"Well, learn," Vasher said. "Because I charge you with command of my army. Use it to protect, not attack. Only use it in an emergency."

The God King nodded dumbly.

Vasher glanced at him, then sighed. "My sin be hidden."

"What?" Susebron asked.

"It's a Command phrase," Vasher said. "The one you can use to give new orders to the D'Denir statues I left in your city."

"But my lord!" Susebron said. "Stone cannot be awakened."

"The stone hasn't been Awakened," Vasher said. "There are human bones in those statues. They are Lifeless."

Human bones. Vivenna felt a chill. He'd told her that bones were usually a bad choice to awaken because it was hard to keep them in the shape of a man during the Awakening process. But what if those bones were encased in stone? Stone that held its shape, stone that would protect them from harm, make them nearly impossible to hurt or break? Awakened objects could be so much stronger than human muscles. If a Lifeless could be created from bones, made strong enough to move a rock body around it . . . You'd have soldiers unlike any that had ever existed.

Colors! she thought.

"There are some thousand original D'Denir in the city," Vasher said, "and most of them should still function, even still. I created them to last."

"But they have no ichor-alcohol," Vivenna said. "They don't even have *veins*!"

Vasher looked at her. It *was* him. The same look to the face, the same expressions. He hadn't changed shape to look like someone else. He just looked like a *Returned* version of himself. What was going on?

"We didn't always have ichor-alcohol," Vasher said. "It makes the Awak-

ening easier and cheaper, but it isn't the only way. And, in the minds of many, I believe it has become a crutch." He glanced at the God King again. "You should be able to imprint them quickly with a new security phrase, then order them out to stop the other army. I think you'll find the phantoms of mine to be . . . very effective. Weapons are virtually useless against the stone."

Susebron nodded again.

"They are your responsibility now," Vasher said, turning away. "Do better with them than I did."

Epilogue

The next day, an army of a thousand stone soldiers charged from the gates of the city, running down the highway after the Lifeless who had left the day before.

Vivenna stood outside the city, leaning against the wall, watching them go.

How often did I stand under the gaze of those D'Denir, she thought. *Never knowing they were alive, just waiting to be Commanded again?* Everyone said that Peacegiver had left the statues behind as a gift to the people, a symbol to remind them not to go to war. She'd always found it strange. A bunch of statues of soldiers, a gift to remind the people that war was terrible?

And yet, they *were* a gift. The gift that had ended the Manywar.

She turned toward Vasher. He, too, leaned against the city wall, Nightblood in one hand. His body had reverted to its mortal form, scraggly hair and all.

"What was that first thing you taught me about Awakening?" she asked.

"That we don't know much?" he asked. "That there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Commands that we haven't discovered yet?"

"That's the one," she said, turning to watch the Awakened statues charge into the distance. "I think you were right."

"You think?"

She smiled. "Will they really be able to stop the other army?"

"Probably," Vasher said, shrugging. "They'll be fast enough to catch up—the flesh Lifeless won't be able to march as quickly as ones with stone feet. I've seen those things fight before. They're *really* tough to beat."

She nodded. "So my people will be safe."

"Unless that God King decides to use the Lifeless statues to conquer them."

She snorted. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a grump, Vasher?"

Finally, Nightblood said. *Someone agrees with me!*

Vasher scowled. "I'm not a grump," he said. "I'm just bad with words."

She smiled.

"Well, that's it, then," he said, picking up his pack. "See you around." With that, he began to walk along the path away from the city.

Vivenna walked up next to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Going with you," she said.

"You're a princess," he said. "Stay with that girl who rules Hallandren or go back to Idris and be proclaimed as the heroine who saved them. Either way will give you a happy life."

"No," she said. "I don't think so. Even if my father *did* take me back, I doubt that I'll ever be able to live a happy life in either a plush palace or a quiet town."

"You'll think differently, after a little time on the road. It's a difficult life."

"I know," she said. "But . . . well, everything I've been—everything I was trained to do—has been a lie wrapped in hatred. I don't want to go back to it. I'm not that person. I don't want to be."

"Who are you, then?"

"I don't know," she said, nodding toward the horizon. "But I think I'll find the answer out there."

They walked for another short time.

"Your family will worry about you," Vasher finally said.

"They'll get over it," she replied.

Finally, he just shrugged. "All right. I don't really care."

She smiled. *It's true,* she thought. *I don't want to go back.* Princess Vivenna was dead. She'd died on the streets of T'Telir. Vivenna the Awakener had no desire to bring her back.

"So," she asked as they walked along the jungle road, "I can't figure it out. Which one are you? Kalad, who started the war, or Peacegiver, who ended it?"

He didn't answer immediately. "It's odd," he finally said, "what history does to a man. I guess people couldn't understand why I suddenly

changed. Why I stopped fighting, and why I brought the Phantoms back to seize control of my own kingdom. So they decided I must have been two people. A man can get confused about his identity when things like that happen."

She grunted in assent. "You're still Returned, though."

"Of course I am," he said.

"Where did you get the Breath?" she asked. "The one a week you need to survive?"

"I carried them with me, on top of the one that makes me Returned. In a lot of ways, Returned aren't quite what people think they are. They don't automatically have hundreds or thousands of Breath."

"But—"

"They're of the Fifth Heightening," Vasher said, interrupting her. "But they don't get there by the number of Breaths, but by the quality. Returned have a single, powerful Breath. One that takes them all the way to the Fifth Heightening. It's a divine Breath, you might say. But their body feeds on Breath, like . . ."

"The sword."

Vasher nodded. "Nightblood only needs it when he's drawn. Returned feed off their Breath once a week. So if you don't give them one, they essentially eat themselves—devouring their one, single Breath. Killing them. However, if you give them extra Breath, on top of their single divine one, they'll feed off those each week."

"So the Hallandren gods could be fed more than one," Vivenna said. "They could have a stock of Breaths, a buffer to keep them alive if one couldn't be provided."

Vasher nodded. "Wouldn't make them as dependent on their religion to care for them, though."

"That's a cynical way of looking at it."

He shrugged.

"So you're going to burn up a Breath every week," she said. "Reducing our stock?"

He nodded. "I used to have thousands of Breath. I ate all of those."

"Thousands? But it would take you years and years to . . ." She trailed off. He'd been alive for over three hundred years. If he absorbed fifty Breaths a year, that *was* thousands of Breaths. "You're an expensive guy to keep around,"

she noted. "How do you keep yourself from looking like a Returned? And why don't you die when you give away your Breaths?"

"Those are my secrets," he said, not looking at her. "Though you should have figured out that Returned can change their forms."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You've got Returned blood in you," he said. "The royal line. Where do you think that ability to change your hair color comes from?"

"Does that mean I can change more than just my hair?"

"Maybe," he said. "Takes time to learn. Go stroll around the Hallandren Court of Gods sometime, though. You'll find that the gods look exactly as they think they should. The old ones look old, the heroic ones become strong, the ones who think a beautiful goddess should be well endowed become unnaturally voluptuous. It's all about how they perceive themselves."

And this is how you perceive yourself, Vasher? she thought, curious. *As the scraggly man, rough and unkempt?*

She said nothing of that; she just walked on, her life sense letting her feel the jungle around them. They'd recovered Vasher's cloak, shirt, and trousers—the ones that Denth had originally taken from him. There had been enough Breath in those to split between the two of them and get them each to the Second Heightening. It wasn't as much as she was used to, but it was a fair bit better than nothing.

"So where are we going, anyway?"

"Ever heard of Kuth and Huth?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "They were your main rivals in the Manywar."

"Somebody's trying to restore them," he said. "A tyrant of some kind. He's apparently recruited an old friend of mine."

"Another one?" she asked.

He shrugged. "There were five of us. Me, Denth, Shashara, Arsteel, and Yesteel. It looks like Yesteel has resurfaced, finally."

"He's related to Arsteel?" Vivenna guessed.

"Brothers."

"Great."

"I know. He's the one who originally figured out how to make ichor-alcohol. I hear rumors that he's got a new form of it. More potent."

"Even better."

They walked in silence for a time longer.

I'm bored, Nightblood said. *Pay attention to me. Why doesn't anyone ever talk to me?*

"Because you're annoying," Vasher snapped.

The sword huffed.

"What's your real name?" Vivenna finally asked.

"My real name?" Vasher asked.

"Yes," she said. "Everyone calls you things. Peacegiver. Kalad. Vasher. Talaxin. Is that last one your real name, the name of the scholar?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"I don't know," he said. "I can't remember the time before I Returned."

"Oh," she said.

"When I came back, however, I did get a name," he finally said. "The Cult of Returned—those who eventually founded the Hallandren Iridescent Tones—found me and kept me alive with Breaths. They gave me a name. I didn't like it much. Didn't seem to fit me."

"Well?" she asked. "What was it?"

"Warbreaker the Peaceful," he finally admitted.

She raised an eyebrow.

"What I can't figure out," he said, "is whether that was truly prophetic, or if I'm just trying to live up to it."

"Does it matter?" she asked.

He walked for a time in silence. "No," he finally said. "No, I guess it doesn't. I just wish I knew if there is really something spiritual about the Returns, or if it's all just cosmic happenstance."

"Probably not for us to know."

"Probably," he agreed.

Silence.

"Should have called you Wartlover the Ugly," she finally said.

"Very mature," he replied. "You really think those sorts of comments are proper for a princess?"

She smiled broadly. "I don't care," she said. "And I never have to again."

Ars Arcanum

TABLE OF THE HEIGHTENINGS

Heightening Number	Approximate Breaths Needed to Reach This Heightening	Effects of the Heightening
First	50	Aura Recognition
Second	200	Perfect Pitch
Third	600	Perfect Color Recognition
Fourth	1,000	Perfect Life Recognition
Fifth	2,000	Agelessness
Sixth	3,500	Instinctive Awakening
Seventh	5,000	Invested Breath Recognition
Eighth	10,000	Command Breaking
Ninth	20,000	Greater Awakening, Audible Command
Tenth	50,000	Color Distortion, Perfect Invocation, ????

Note One: Reaching above the Sixth Heightening is incredibly rare, and so few people understand the powers of the Seventh Heightening and above. Very little research has been done. The only known people ever to reach the Eighth Heightening and above are the Hallandren God Kings.

Note Two: Returned appear to achieve the Fifth Heightening by virtue of their Breath. It is theorized that they do not actually receive two thousand Breaths when they Return, but instead receive a single, powerful Breath, which brings with it the powers of the first five Heightenings.

Note Three: The numbers given in the table above are only estimates, as very little is known about the upper Heightenings. Indeed, even for the lower levels, fewer or more Breaths may be required to achieve a given Heightening, depending on circumstances and the strength of the Breath.

Note Four: Each additional Breath grants some things, no matter which Heightening an Awakener has achieved. The more breath one has, the more resistant to disease and aging a person is, the easier it is for them to distinguish colors, the more naturally they can learn to Awaken, and the stronger their life sense.

HEIGHTENING POWERS

Aura Recognition: The First Heightening grants a person the ability to see the Breath auras of others instinctively. This allows them to judge roughly how many Breaths the person contains and the general health of that Breath. Persons without this Heightening have a much more difficult time judging auras directly, and must rely instead on how deeply the colors around a person change when they enter the aura. Without at least the First Heightening, it is impossible for the naked eye to notice an Awakener who has fewer than about thirty Breaths.

Perfect Pitch: The Second Heightening grants perfect pitch to those who achieve it.

Perfect Color Recognition: While each gained Breath leads a person to greater appreciation of colors, it isn't until one reaches the Third Heightening that one can instantly and instinctively determine exact shades of colors and their hue harmonics.

Perfect Life Sense: At the Fourth Heightening, an Awakener's life sense achieves its maximum strength.

Agelessness: At the Fifth Heightening, an Awakener's resistance to aging and disease reaches its maximum strength. These persons are immune to most toxins, including the effects of alcohol, and most physical ailments. (Such as headaches, diseases, and organ failure.) The person no longer ages, and becomes functionally immortal.

Instinctive Awakening: All persons of the Sixth Heightening and above immediately understand and can use basic Awakening Commands without training or practice. More difficult Commands are easier for them to master and to discover.

Breath Recognition: Those few persons who have reached the Seventh Heightening gain the ability to recognize the auras of objects, and can tell when something has been Invested with Breath via Awakening.

Command Breaking: Any persons of the Eighth Heightening or more gain the ability to override Commands in other Invested objects, including Lifeless. This requires concentration and leaves the Awakener exhausted.

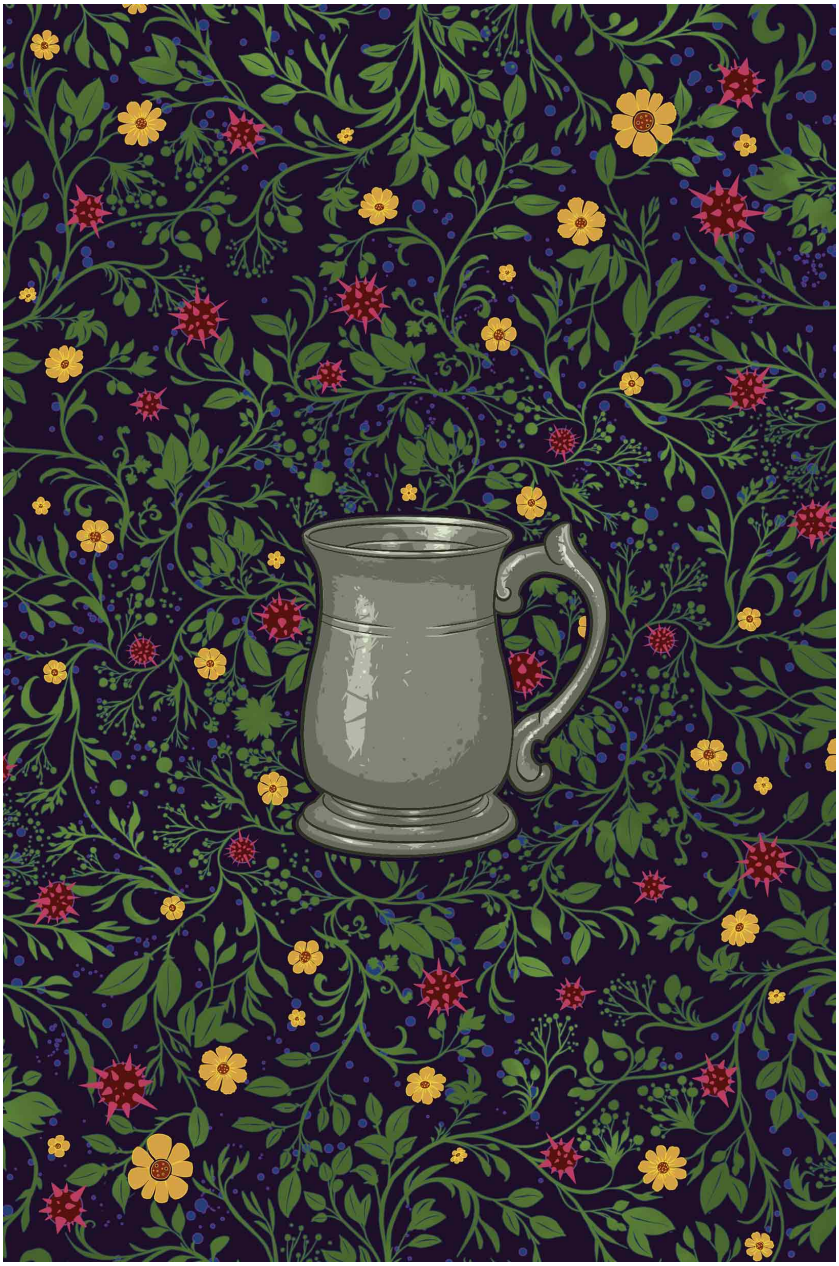
Greater Awakening: Persons of the Ninth Heightening are reportedly able to Awaken stone and steel, though doing so requires large Investitures of Breath and specialized Commands. This ability has not been studied or confirmed.

Audible Command: Persons of the Ninth Heightening also gain the ability to Awaken objects that they are not physically touching, but that are within the sound of their voice.

Color Distortion: At the Tenth Heightening, an Awakener gains the natural and intrinsic ability to bend light around white objects, creating colors from them as if from a prism.

Perfect Invocation: Awakeners of the Tenth Heightening can draw more color from the objects they use to fuel their art. This leaves objects drained to white, rather than grey.

Other: There are rumors of other powers granted by the Tenth Heightening which are not understood or have not been made known by those who have achieved it.



TRESS OF THE EMERALD SEA

BRANDON SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOWARD LYON

TRESS OF THE EMERALD SEA

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FOR EMILY
Who has all my love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What a ride.

When I sat down to write this book on a whim, I had no idea where the whole project would end up going. (Be sure to check out the postscript at the end of the book, where I talk about my inspirations for it in ways that might be a little too spoilery to put up front.)

I envisioned something special for the four books from the 2022 Secret Projects Kickstarter campaign, but my team has gone above and beyond. This turned out to be an absolutely gorgeous volume. I know that many of you will be listening to the audiobook, which certainly has its own special artistry—but if you get a chance, make sure you leaf through the print version. Because wow.

It's fitting, therefore, to start off our thank-you with Howard Lyon. I envisioned these books being kind of an "artist's showcase," where we picked an artist and let them go a little wild with what they wanted to do in creating the book. Howard did so much on this book. The cover, the endpapers, the interior illustrations—but really, the entire design owes a lot to him. Thank you, Howard, for being willing to take on this huge project. You did an amazing job.

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At Dragonsteel, our COO is Emily Sanderson. Our Editorial department is Peter Ahlstrom, Karen Ahlstrom, Kristy S. Gilbert, and Betsey Ahlstrom. Kristy Kugler was our copyeditor. Our Operations department is Matt "Are you going to do this in every book, Brandon?" Hatch, Emma Tan-Stoker, Jane Horne, Kathleen

Dorsey Sanderson, Makena Saluone, and Hazel Cummings. Our Publicity and Marketing department is Adam Horne, Jeremy Palmer, and Taylor Hatch.

These folks don't get enough credit for all the wonderful things they do to make my projects happen. In particular, with this Kickstarter campaign, I needed their enthusiasm and their wonderful ideas. (For example, the original idea for a subscription box was Adam's several years ago.) It was a lot of work to get all of this put together and executed, so if you have a chance, thank my team in person.

And, of course, we need to give an extra special thanks to my Fulfillment department. Kara Stewart's team worked long hours to get these books to you all. They deserve a round of applause, and include Christi Jacobsen, Lex Willhite, Kellyn Neumann, Mem Grange, Michael Bateman, Joy Allen, Katy Ives, Richard Rubert, Sean VanBuskirk, Isabel Chrisman, Tori Mecham, Ally Reep, Jacob Chrisman, Alex Lyon, and Owen Knowlton.

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We had a special sensitivity reader help us with this book—Jenna Beacom—and she was incredible. If you ever need someone to give you help on a book in regards to Deaf representation and how to write a deaf character, go straight to Jenna. She'll help you get it right.

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Christopher Cottingham, Aaron Biggs, and William Juan.

Last but not least, I need to give a special thanks to all of you who backed the Kickstarter project. I wasn't gunning for the number one spot—let alone double that. I just wanted to do something different, something interesting, and something cool. Your support continues to mean so very much to me. Thank you.

Brandon Sanderson

PART
I

THE GIRL

I

In the middle of the ocean, there was a girl who lived upon a rock.

This was not an ocean like the one you have imagined.

Nor was the rock like the one you have imagined.

The girl, however, *might* be as you imagined—assuming you imagined her as thoughtful, soft-spoken, and overly fond of collecting cups.

Men often described the girl as having hair the color of wheat. Others called it the color of caramel, or occasionally the color of honey. The girl wondered why men so often used food to describe women's features. There was a hunger to such men that was best avoided.

In her estimation, "light brown" was sufficiently descriptive—though the hue of her hair was not its most interesting trait. That would be her hair's unruliness. Each morning she heroically tamed it with brush and comb, then muzzled it with a ribbon and a tight braid. Yet some strands always found a way to escape and would wave free in the wind, eagerly greeting everyone she passed.

The girl had been given the unfortunate name of Glorf upon her birth (don't judge; it was a family name), but her wild hair earned her the name everyone knew her by: Tress. That moniker was, in Tress's estimation, her most interesting feature.

Tress had been raised to possess a certain inalienable pragmatism.

Such is a common failing among those who live on dour lifeless islands from which they can never leave. When you are greeted each day by a black stone landscape, it influences your perspective on life.

The island was shaped rather like an old man's crooked finger, emerging from the ocean to point toward the horizon. It was made entirely of barren black saltstone, and was large enough to support a fair-sized town and a duke's mansion. Though locals called the island the Rock, its name on the maps was Diggen's Point. No one remembered who Diggen was anymore, but he had obviously been a clever fellow, for he'd left the Rock soon after naming it and never returned.

In the evenings, Tress would often sit on her family's porch and sip salty tea from one of her favorite cups while looking out over the green ocean. Yes, I did say the ocean was green. Also, it was not wet. We're getting there.

As the sun set, Tress would wonder about the people who visited the Rock in their ships. Not that anyone in their right mind would deem the Rock a tourist destination. The black saltstone was crumbly and got into everything. It also made most kinds of

agriculture impossible, eventually tainting any soil brought from off the island. The only food the island grew came from compost vats.

While the Rock did have important wells that brought up water from a deep aquifer—something that visiting ships required—the equipment that worked the salt mines belched a constant stream of black smoke into the air.

In summary, the atmosphere was dismal, the ground wretched, and the views depressing. Oh, and have I mentioned the deadly spores?

Diggen's Point lay near the Verdant Lunagree. The term lunagree, you should know, refers to the places where the twelve moons hang in the sky around Tress's planet in oppressively low stationary orbits. Big enough to fill a full third of the sky, one of the twelve is always visible, no matter where you travel. Dominating your view, like a wart on your eyeball.

The locals worshipped those twelve moons as gods, which we can all agree is far more ridiculous than whatever it is you worship. However, it's easy to see where the superstition began, bearing in mind the spores—like colorful sand—that the moons dropped upon the land.

They'd pour down from the lunagrees, and the Verdant Lunagree was visible some fifty or sixty miles from the island. That was as close as you ever wanted to get to a lunagree—a great shimmering fountain of colorful motes, vibrant and exceedingly dangerous. The spores filled the world's oceans, creating vast seas not of water, but of alien dust. Ships sailed that dust like ships sail water here, and you should not find that so unusual. How many other planets have *you* visited? Perhaps they all sail oceans of pollen, and *your* home is the freakish one.

The spores were only dangerous if you got them wet. Which was rather a problem, considering the number of wet things that leak from human bodies even when they're healthy. The least bit of water would cause the spores to sprout explosively, and the results ranged from uncomfortable to deadly. Breathe in a burst of verdant spores, for example, and your saliva would send vines growing out of your mouth—or in more interesting cases, into your sinuses and out around your eyes.

The spores could be rendered inert by two things: salt or silver. Hence the reason the locals of Diggen's Point didn't terribly mind the salty taste of their water or food. They'd teach their children

this ever-so-important rule: salt and silver halt the killer. An acceptable little poem, if you're the sort of barbarian who enjoys slant rhymes.

Regardless, with the spores, the smoke, and the salt, one can perhaps see why the king who the duke served needed a law requiring the population to remain on the Rock. Oh, he gave reasons that involved important military phrases like "essential personnel," "strategic resupply," and "friendly anchorage," but everyone knew the truth. The place was so inhospitable, even the smog found it depressing. Ships visited periodically for repairs, to drop off waste for the compost vats, and to take on new water. But each strictly obeyed the king's rules: no locals were to be taken from Diggen's Point. Ever.

And so, Tress would sit on her steps in the evenings, watching ships sail away as a column of spores dropped from the lunagree and the sun moved out from behind the moon and crept toward the horizon. She'd sip salty tea from a cup with horses painted on it, and she'd think, *There's a beauty to this, actually. I like it here. And I believe I shall be fine to remain here all my life.*

2

Perhaps you were surprised to hear those last words. Tress *wanted* to stay on the Rock? She *liked* it there?

Where was her sense of adventure? Her yearning for new lands? Her wanderlust?

Well, this isn't the part of the story where you ask questions. So kindly keep them to yourself. That said, you must understand that this is a tale about people who are both what they seem and *not* what they seem. Simultaneously. A story of contradictions. In other words, it is a story about human beings.

In this case, Tress wasn't your ordinary heroine—in that she was in fact decidedly ordinary. Indeed, Tress considered herself categorically boring. She liked her tea lukewarm. She went to bed on time. She loved her parents, occasionally squabbled with her little brother, and didn't litter. She was fair at needlepoint and had a talent for baking, but had no other noteworthy skills.

She didn't train at fencing in secret. She couldn't talk to animals. She had no hidden royalty or deities in her lineage, though her great-grandmother Glorf had reportedly once waved at the king. That had been from atop the Rock while he was sailing past, many miles away, so Tress didn't think it counted.

In short, Tress was a normal teenage girl. She knew this because the other girls often mentioned how *they* weren't like "everyone

else," and after a while Tress figured that the group "everyone else" must include only her. The other girls were obviously right, as they all knew how to be unique—they were so good at it, in fact, that they did it together.

Tress was generally more thoughtful than most people, and she didn't like to impose by asking for what she wanted. She'd remain quiet when the other girls were laughing or telling jokes about her. After all, they were having so much fun. It would be impolite to spoil that, and presumptuous of her to request that they stop.

Sometimes the more boisterous youths talked of seeking adventure in foreign oceans. Tress found that notion frightening. How could she leave her parents and brother? Besides, she had her cup collection.

Tress cherished her cups. She had fine porcelain cups with painted glaze, clay cups that felt rough beneath her fingers, and wooden cups that were rugged and well-used.

Several of the sailors who frequently docked at Diggen's Point knew of her fondness, and they sometimes brought her cups from all across the twelve oceans: distant lands where the spores were reportedly crimson, azure, or even *golden*. She'd give the sailors pies in exchange for their gifts, the ingredients purchased with the pittance she earned scrubbing windows.

The cups they brought her were often battered and worn, but Tress didn't mind. A cup with a chip or ding in it had a *story*. She loved them all because they brought the world to her. Whenever she sipped from one of the cups, she imagined she could taste far-off foods and drinks, and perhaps understand a little of the people who had crafted them.

Each time Tress acquired a new cup, she brought it to Charlie to show it off.

Charlie claimed to be the groundskeeper at the duke's mansion at the top of the Rock, but Tress knew he was actually the duke's son. Charlie's hands were soft like a child's rather than callused, and he was better fed than anyone else in town. His hair was always cut neatly, and though he took his signet ring off when he saw her, it left a slightly lighter patch of skin that made it clear he usually wore it—on the finger that marked a member of the nobility.

Besides, Tress wasn't certain what "grounds" Charlie thought needed keeping. The mansion was, after all, on the Rock. There had been a tree on the property once, but it had done the sensible thing

and died a few years earlier. There were some potted plants though, which let him pretend.

Grey motes swirled in the wind by her feet as she climbed the path up to the mansion. Grey spores were dead—the very air around the Rock was salty enough to kill spores—but she still held her breath as she hurried past. She turned left at the fork—the right path went to the mines—then wove up the switchbacks to the overhang.

Here the mansion squatted like a corpulent frog atop its lily. Tress wasn't certain why the duke liked it up here. It was closer to the smog, so maybe he liked the similarly tempered company. Climbing all this way was difficult—but judging by how the duke's family fit their clothing, perhaps they figured they could use the exercise.

Five soldiers watched the grounds—though only Snagu and Lead were on duty now—and they did their job well. After all, it had been a horribly long time since anyone in the duke's family had died from the myriad of dangers a nobleman faced while living on the Rock. (Those included boredom, stubbed toes, and choking on cobbler.)

She'd brought the soldiers pies, naturally. As they ate, she considered showing the two men her new cup. It was made completely of tin, stamped with letters in a language that ran top to bottom instead of left to right. But no, she didn't want to bother them.

They let her pass, although it wasn't her day to wash the mansion's windows. She found Charlie around back, practicing with his fencing sword. When he saw her, he put it down and hurriedly took off his signet ring.

"Tress!" he said. "I thought you wouldn't be by today!"

Having just turned seventeen, Charlie was two months older than she was. He had an abundance of smiles, and she had identified each one. For instance, the wide-toothed one he gave her now said he was genuinely happy to have an excuse to be done with fencing practice. He wasn't as fond of it as his father thought he should be.

"Swordplay, Charlie?" she asked. "Is that a groundskeeper's task?"

He picked up the thin dueling sword. "This? Oh, but it *is* for gardening." He took a half-hearted swipe at one of the potted plants on the patio. The plant wasn't quite dead yet, but the leaf Charlie split certainly wasn't going to improve its chances.

“Gardening,” Tress said. “With a *sword*.”

“It’s how they do things on the king’s island,” Charlie said. He swiped again. “There is always war there, you know. So if you consider it, it’s natural the groundskeepers would learn to trim plants with a sword. Don’t want to get ambushed when you’re unarmed.”

He wasn’t a good liar, but that was part of what Tress liked about him. Charlie was *genuine*. He even lied in an authentic way. And seeing how bad he was at telling them, the lies couldn’t be held against him. They were so obvious, they were better than many a person’s truths.

He swiped his sword in the vague direction of the plant once more, then looked at her and cocked an eyebrow. She shook her head. So he gave her his “you’ve caught me but I can’t admit it” grin and rammed the sword into the dirt of the pot, then plopped down on the low garden wall.

The sons of dukes were not supposed to plop. One might therefore consider Charlie to have been a young man of extraordinary talents.

Tress settled in next to him, basket in her lap.

“What did you bring me?” he said.

She took out a small meat pie. “Pigeon,” she said, “and carrots. With a thyme-seasoned gravy.”

“A noble combination,” he said.

“I think the duke’s son, if he were here, would disagree.”

“The duke’s son is only allowed to eat dishes with names that have weird foreign accents over their letters,” Charlie said. “And he’s never allowed to stop sword practice to eat. So it is fortunate

that I am not him."

Charlie took a bite. She watched for the smile. And there it was: the smile of delight. She had spent an entire day in thought, contemplating what she could make with the ingredients that had been on sale in the port market, hoping to earn that particular smile.

"So, what else did you bring?" he asked.

"Charlie the groundskeeper," she said, "you have just received a very free pie, and now you presume to ask for more?"

"Presume?" he said around a mouthful of pie. He poked her basket with his free hand. "I know there's more. Out with it."

She grinned. To most she wouldn't dare impose, but Charlie was different. She revealed the tin cup.

"Aaah," Charlie said, then put aside the pie and took the cup reverently in both hands. "Now *this* is special."

"Do you know anything about that writing?" she asked, eager.

"It's old Iriali," he said. "They vanished, you know. The entire people: poof. There one day, gone the next, their island left uninhabited. Now, that was three hundred years ago, so no one alive has ever met one of them, but they supposedly had golden hair. Like yours, the color of sunlight."

"My hair is not the color of sunlight, Charlie."

"Your hair is the color of sunlight, if sunlight were light brown," Charlie said. It might be said he had a way with words. In that his words often got away.

"I'd wager this cup has quite the history," he said. "Forged for an Iriali nobleman the day before he—and his people—were taken by the gods. The cup was left on the table, to be collected by the poor fisherwoman who first arrived on the island and discovered the horror of an entire people gone. She passed the cup down to her grandson, who became a pirate. He eventually buried his ill-gotten treasure deep beneath the spores. Only to be recovered now, after eons in darkness, to find its way to your hands." He held the cup up to catch the light.

Tress smiled as he spoke. While washing the mansion's windows, she'd occasionally hear Charlie's parents berate him for talking so much; they thought it silly and unbecoming of his station. They rarely let him finish. She found that a shame. For while yes, he did ramble sometimes, she'd come to understand it was because Charlie liked *stories* the way Tress liked *cups*.

“Thank you, Charlie,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For giving me what I want.”

He knew what she meant. It wasn’t cups or stories.

“Always,” he said, placing his hand on hers. “Always what you want, Tress. And you can always tell me what it is. I know you don’t usually do that, with others.”

“What do *you* want, Charlie?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Other than one thing, that is. One thing I shouldn’t want, but I do. Instead, I’m *supposed* to want adventure. Like in the stories. You know those stories?”

“The ones with fair maidens,” Tress said, “who always get captured and don’t get to do much besides sit there? Maybe call for help now and then?”

“I suppose that does happen,” he said.

“Why are they always fair maidens?” she said. “Are there maidens that are unfair? Perhaps they mean ‘fare,’ as in food. I could be that kind of maiden. I’m good with food.” She grimaced. “I’m glad I’m not in a story, Charlie. I’d end up captured for certain.”

“And I would probably die quickly,” he said. “I’m a coward, Tress. It’s the truth.”

“Nonsense. You’re merely an ordinary person.”

“Have you…seen how I respond around the duke?”

She grew silent. Because she had.

“If I weren’t a coward,” he said, “I’d be able to tell you things I cannot. But Tress, if you did get captured, I’d help anyway. I’d put on armor, Tress. Shining armor. Or maybe dull armor. I think if someone I knew were captured, I wouldn’t take the time to shine the armor. Do you think those heroes pause to shine it, when people are in danger? That doesn’t sound very helpful.”

“Charlie,” Tress said, “do you *have* armor?”

“I’d find some,” he promised. “I would figure something out, surely. Even a coward would be brave in the proper armor, right? There are lots of dead people in those types of stories. Surely I could get some from one of—”

A shout sounded from within the mansion, interrupting the conversation. It was Charlie’s father grousing. So far as Tress had been able to tell, yelling at things was the duke’s one and only job on the island, and he took it very seriously.

Charlie glanced toward the sounds and grew tense, his smile fading. But when the shouts didn't draw near, he looked back at the cup. The moment was gone, but another took its place, as they tend to do. Not as intimate, but still valuable because it was time with him.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "for bringing up silly things like fare maidens and robbing armor from dead people. But I like that you listen to me anyway. Thank you, Tress."

"I am fond of your stories," she said, taking the cup and turning it over. "Do you think any of what you said about this cup is true?"

"It *could* be," Charlie said. "That's the great thing about stories. But look at this writing—it says it did once belong to a king. His name is right here."

"And you learned that language in…"

"…gardening school," he said. "In case we had to read the warnings on the packaging of certain dangerous plants."

"Like how you wear a lord's doublet and hose…"

"…because it makes me an excellent decoy, should assassins arrive and try to kill the duke's son."

"As you've said. But why then do you take off your ring?"

"Uh…" He glanced at his hand, then met her eyes. "Well, I guess I'd rather *you* not mistake me for someone else. Someone I don't want to have to be."

He smiled then, his timid smile. His "please go with me on this, Tress" smile. Because the son of a duke could not *openly* fraternize with the girl who washed the windows. A nobleman pretending to be a commoner though? Feigning low station to learn of the people of his realm? Why, that was expected. It happened in so many stories, it was practically an institution.

"That," she said, "makes perfect sense."

"Now then," he said, retrieving his pie. "Tell me about your day. I must hear."

"I went browsing through the market for ingredients," she said, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I purchased a pound of fish—salmon, imported from Erik Island, where they have many lakes. Poloni marked it down because he thought it was going bad, but that was actually the fish in the *next* barrel. So I got my fish for a *steal*."

"Fascinating," he said. "No one throws a fit when you visit? They don't call their children out and make you shake their hands? Tell

me more. Please, I want to know how you realized the fish wasn't bad."

With his prodding, she continued elucidating the mundane details of her life. He forced her to do it each time she visited. He, in turn, paid attention. That was the proof that his fondness for talking wasn't a failing. He was equally good at listening. At least to her. Indeed, Charlie found her life *interesting* for some unfathomable reason.

As she talked, Tress felt warm. She often did when she visited—because she climbed up high and was closer to the sun, so it was warmer up here. Obviously.

Except it was moonshadow at the moment, when the sun hid behind the moon and everything became a few degrees cooler. And today she was growing tired of certain lies she told herself. Perhaps there was another reason she felt warm. It was there in Charlie's current smile, and she knew it would be in her own as well.

He didn't listen to her *only* because he was fascinated by the lives of peasants.

She didn't visit *only* because she wanted to hear his stories.

In fact, on the deepest level it wasn't about cups or stories at all. It was, instead, about gloves.

THE DUKE

3

Tress had noticed that a nice pair of gloves made her daily work go so much better. Now, she meant the *good* kind of gloves, made of a soft leather that molds to your hands as you use them. The kind that—if you oil them well and don't leave them out in the sun—don't ever grow stiff. The kind that are so comfortable, you go to wash your hands and are surprised to find you're still wearing them.

The perfect set of gloves is invaluable. And Charlie was like a good set of gloves. The longer she spent with him, the more *right* their time together felt. The brighter even the moonshadows were, and the easier her burdens became. She did love interesting cups, but a part of that was because each one gave her an excuse to come and visit him.

The thing growing between them felt so good, so wonderful, that Tress was frightened to call it love. From the way the other youths talked, "love" was dangerous. Their love seemed to be about jealousy and insecurity. It was about passionate shouting matches and more passionate reconciliations. It was less like a good pair of gloves, and more like a hot coal that would burn your hands.

Love had always frightened Tress. But when Charlie put his hand on hers again, she felt heat. The fire she'd always feared. The coal was in there after all, just contained—like in a good stove.

She wanted to leap into his heat, all logic discarded.

Charlie froze. They'd touched many times before, of course, but this was different. This moment. This dream. He blushed, but let his hand linger. Then he finally raised it and ran his fingers through his hair, grinning sheepishly. Because he was Charlie, that didn't spoil the moment, but instead only made it more sweet.

Tress searched for the perfect thing to say. There were any number of lines that would have capitalized on that moment. She could have said, "Charlie, could you hold this for me while I walk around the grounds?" then offered her hand back to him.

She could have said, "Help, I can't breathe. Staring at you has taken my breath away."

She could even have said something completely insane, such as "I like you."

Instead she said, "Huuhhh. Hands are warm." She followed it with a laugh that she choked on halfway through, exactly mimicking—by pure chance—the call of an elephant seal.

It might be said that Tress had a way with words. In that her words tended to get in her way.

In response, Charlie gave her a smile. A wonderful smile, more and more confident the longer it lasted. It was one she'd never seen before. It said: "I think I love you, Tress, elephant seal notwithstanding."

She smiled back at him. Then, over his shoulder, she saw the duke standing in the window. Tall and straight, the man wore military-style clothing that looked like it had been pinned to him by the various medals on the breast.

He was *not* smiling.

Indeed, she'd seen him smile only once, during the punishment of old Lotari—who had tried to sneak off the island by stowing away on a merchant ship. That seemed the duke's sole smile; perhaps Charlie had used the entire family's quota. Nevertheless, if the duke did have just one smile, he made up for it by displaying far too many teeth.

The duke faded into the shadows of the house, but his presence loomed over Tress as she bade farewell to Charlie. On her way down the steps, she expected to hear shouting. Instead an ominous silence followed her. The tense silence that came after a lightning flash.

It chased her down the path and around to her home, where she

murmured something to her parents about being tired. She went to her room and waited for the silence to end. For the soldiers to knock, then demand to know why the girl who washed the windows had dared to touch the duke's son.

When nothing like that came, she dared hope that she was reading too much into the duke's expression. Then she remembered the duke's singular smile. After that, worries nipped at her all night.

She rose early in the morning, wrestled her hair into a tail, then trudged to the market. Here she'd sort through the day-old goods and near-spoiled ingredients for something she could afford. Despite the early hour, the market was abuzz with activity. Men swept dead spores off the path while people gathered in chattering knots.

Tress braced herself for the news, then decided nothing could be worse than the awful anticipation she'd suffered all night.

She was wrong.

The duke had sent out a declaration: he and his family were going to leave the island that very day.

THE SON

4

Leave.

Leave the island?

People didn't *leave* the island.

Tress knew, logically, that wasn't explicitly true. Royal officials could leave. The duke left on occasion to report to the king. Plus he'd earned all those fancy medals by killing people from a distant place where they looked slightly different. He'd apparently been quite heroic during those wars; you could tell because a great number of his troops had died, while he lived.

But in the past, the duke had never taken his family. "The ducal heir has come of age," the proclamation announced, "and so we shall present him for betrothal to the various princesses of the civilized seas."

Now, Tress *was* a pragmatic young woman. And so she only *thought* about ripping her shopping basket to shreds in frustration. She merely *deliberated* whether it would be appropriate to swear at the top of her lungs. She *barely considered* marching up to the duke's mansion to demand he change his mind.

Instead she went about her shopping in a numb haze, using the familiar action to give her suddenly crumbling life a semblance of normality. She found some garlic she was certain she could salvage, several potatoes that hadn't withered too badly, and even some

grain where the weevils were large enough to pick out.

Yesterday, she'd have been pleased with this haul. Today she couldn't think of anything but Charlie.

It seemed so incredibly unfair. She'd only *just* acknowledged what she felt for him, and already everything was turning upside down? Yes, she'd been told to expect this pain. Love involved pain. But that was the salt in your tea—wasn't there also supposed to be a dab of honey? Wasn't there supposed to be—dared she wish—*passion*?

She was to receive all of the detriments of a romantic affair with none of the advantages.

Unfortunately, her practicality began to assert itself. So long as the two of them had been able to pretend, the real world hadn't been able to claim them. But the days of pretending were over. What had she *thought* was going to happen? That the duke would let her marry his son? What did *she* think she could offer someone like Charlie? She was nothing compared to a princess. Think of how many *cups* they could afford!

In the pretend world, marriage was about love. In the real world, it was about politics. A word laden with a large number of meanings, though most of them boiled down to: *This is a matter for nobles—and (begrudgingly) the very rich—to discuss. Not peasants.*

She finished her shopping and started up the path toward her home, where at least she could commiserate with her parents. But it appeared that the duke was wasting no time, for she saw a procession snaking down toward the docks.

She turned around and walked back via a different path, arriving right after the procession—which began to load the family's things onto a merchant ship. Nobody was allowed to leave the island. Unless they were, instead, somebody. Tress worried she wouldn't get a chance to speak with Charlie. Then she worried that she *would*, but he wouldn't want to see her.

Mercifully, she caught him standing at the side of the crowd, searching among the gathering people. The moment he spotted her, he rushed over. "Tress! Oh, moons. I worried I wouldn't find you in time."

"I…" What did she say?

"Fare maiden," he said, bowing, "I must take my leave."

"Charlie," she said softly, "don't try to be someone you aren't. I *know* you."

He grimaced. He was wearing a traveling coat and even a hat. The duke considered hats improper wear except during travel. "Tress," he said, softer, "I'm afraid I've lied to you. You see…I'm not the groundskeeper. I'm…um…the duke's son."

"Amazing. Who would have thought that Charlie the groundskeeper and Charles the duke's heir would be the same person, considering they're the same age, look the same, and wear the same clothing?"

"Er, yes. Are you angry at me?"

"Anger is in line right now," Tress said. "It's seventh down, sandwiched between confusion and fatigue."

Behind them, Charlie's father and mother marched up onto the ship. Their servants followed with the last of the luggage.

Charlie gazed at his feet. "It seems I am to be married. To a princess of some nation or another. What do you think of that?"

"I…" What should she say? "I wish you well?"

He looked up and met her eyes. "Always, Tress. Remember?"

It was hard for her, but after groping around for a moment, she found the words hiding in a corner, trying to avoid her. "I wish," she said, seizing hold of them, "that you wouldn't do that. Get married. To someone else."

"Oh?" He blinked. "Do you really?"

"I mean, I'm sure they are very nice. The princesses."

"I believe it's part of the job description," Charlie said. "Like… have you heard of the things they do in stories? Resuscitate amphibians? Notice for parents that their children have wet the bed? One would have to be relatively kind to do these services."

"Yes," Tress said. "I…" She took a deep breath. "I would still… rather you didn't marry one of them."

"Well then, I shan't," Charlie said.

"I don't believe you have a choice, Charlie. Your father wants you married. It's *politics*."

"Ah, but you see, I have a secret weapon." He took her hands and leaned in.

Behind, his father moved up to the prow of the ship and looked down, scowling. Charlie, however, smiled a lopsided smile. His "look how sneaky I am" smile. He used it when he wasn't being particularly sneaky.

"What…kind of secret weapon, Charlie?" she asked.

"I can be *incredibly* boring."

"That's not a weapon."

"It might not be one in a war, Tress," he said. "But in courtship? It is as fine a weapon as the sharpest rapier. You know how I go on. And on. And on."

"I *like* how you go on, Charlie. I don't mind the on, in fact. I sometimes quite enjoy the *on*."

"You are a special case," Charlie said. "You are…well, this is kind of silly…but you're like a pair of gloves, Tress."

"I *am*?" she said, choking up.

"Yes. Don't be offended. I mean, when I have to practice the sword, I wear these gloves and—"

"I understand," she whispered.

From atop the ship, Charlie's father shouted for him to be quick. Tress realized then that—like Charlie had different kinds of smiles—his father had different kinds of scowls. She didn't much like what the current one implied about her.

Charlie squeezed her hands. "Listen, Tress. I promise you. I'm *not* going to get married. I'm going to go to those kingdoms, and I'm going to be so *insufferably* boring that none of the girls will have me.

"I'm not good at much. I've never scored a single point against my father in sparring. I spill my soup at formal dinners. I talk so much, even my footman—who is *paid* to listen—comes up with creative reasons to interrupt me. The other day I was telling him the story of the fish and the gull, and he pretended to stub his toe, and…"

The duke shouted again.

"I can do this, Tress," Charlie insisted. "I *will* do this. At each stop, I'll pick out a cup for you, all right? Once I've bored the current princess to death—and my father has decided we need to move on—I'll send you the cup. As proof, you see." He squeezed her hands once more. "I'll do it, not only because you listen. But because you know me, Tress. You've always been able to see me when others don't."

He began turning to finally respond to his father's shouts. Tress held on, clinging to his hands. Unwilling to let it end.

Charlie gave her one last smile. And though he was plainly trying to act confident, she knew his smiles. This was his uncertain one, hopeful but worried.

"You are my gloves too, Charlie," Tress said to him.

After that, she had to let go so he could jog up the plank. She'd imposed enough already.

The duke forced his son belowdecks as the ship slipped off the dead grey spores nearest the Rock and into the true verdant ocean. Wind caught the ship's sails and it struck out toward the horizon, leaving a wake of disturbed emerald dust behind it. Tress climbed up to her house, then watched from the cliff until the ship was the size of a cup. Then the size of a speck. Then it vanished.

After that, the waiting began.

They say that to wait is the most excruciating of life's torments. "They" in this case refers to writers, who have nothing useful to do, so fill their time thinking of things to say. Any working person can tell you that having time to *wait* is a luxury.

Tress had windows to wash. Meals to cook. A little brother to watch. Her father, Lem, had never recovered from his accident in the mines, and though he tried to assist, he could barely walk. He helped Tress's mother, Ulba, knit socks all day, which they sold to sailors, but with the expense of yarn they turned only a meager profit.

So Tress didn't *wait.* She worked.

Still, it was an enormous relief when the first cup arrived. It was delivered by Hoid the cabin boy. (Yes, that's me. What tipped you off? Was it perhaps the name?) A beautiful porcelain cup, without even a single chip in it.

The world brightened that day. Tress could almost imagine Charlie speaking as she read the accompanying letter, which detailed the affections of the first princess. With heroic monotony, he had listed the sounds his stomach made when he lay in various positions at night. As that hadn't been quite enough, he'd then explained how he kept his toenail clippings and gave them names. That had done it.

Fight on, my loquacious love, Tress thought as she scrubbed the mansion's windows the next day. *Be brave, my mildly gross warrior.*

The second cup was of pure red glass, tall and thin, and looked like it could contain more liquid than it actually did. Perhaps it came from a particularly stingy tavern. He'd put off this princess by explaining what he'd had for breakfast in intricate detail, as he'd counted the pieces of the scrambled egg and categorized them by size.

The third cup was an enormous solid pewter tankard with heft to

it. Perhaps it was from one of those places Charlie had made up, where people always needed to carry weapons. Tress was reasonably certain she could knock out an attacker by swinging the tankard. The latest princess hadn't been able to withstand an extended conversation about the benefits of various punctuation marks, including a few Charlie had invented.

The fourth package's card included no letter, only a small drawing: two gloved hands holding to one another. The cup had a painted butterfly on it with a red ocean underneath; she found it odd that the butterfly wasn't terrified of the spores. Maybe it was a prisoner, forced to fly out over the ocean to its doom.

The fifth cup never arrived.

Tress tried to play it off, telling herself that it must have been interrupted in transit. After all, any number of dangerous things could happen to a ship sailing the spores. Pirates or…you know… spores.

But the months stretched long, each more tedious than the one before. Every time a ship arrived at the docks, Tress was there asking for mail.

Nothing.

She did this for months on end, until an entire year had passed since Charlie had left.

Then, finally, a note. Not from Charlie, but from his father, sent to the entire town. The duke was returning to Diggen's Point at long last, and he was bringing his wife, his heir…and his new daughter-in-law.

THE BRIDE

5

Tress sat upon her porch, leaning against her mother, and watched the horizon. She held the last cup Charlie had sent. The one with the suicidal butterfly.

Her lukewarm tea tasted of tears.

"It wasn't very practical," she whispered to her mother.

"Love rarely is," her mother replied. She was a stout woman, with a cheerful kind of girth. Five years ago, she'd been thin as a reed. Then Tress had learned her mother was giving up a portion of her food to her children—from then on, Tress had taken over shopping and had made their money stretch further.

A ship appeared on the horizon.

"I've finally thought of what I should have said." Tress pushed her hair out of her eyes. "When he left. I called him a glove. It isn't so bad as it sounds. He'd just called me one, you see. I've had a year to think about it, and I realized I could have said something more."

Her mother squeezed her shoulder as the ship drew inevitably closer.

"I should have said," Tress whispered, "that I loved him."

Her mother joined her as she marched, like a soldier on the front lines facing cannon fire, down to the docks to greet the ship. Her father, with his bad leg, stayed behind—which was good. She feared he'd make a scene, the way he'd been grumbling about the

duke and his son these last few months.

But Tress could not find it in herself to blame Charlie. It wasn't his fault that he was the duke's son. It could have happened to anyone, really.

A crowd had gathered. The duke's letter said he wanted a celebration—and he was bringing food and wine. Whatever else the people thought of getting a new future duchess, they were not going to miss a chance at free alcohol. (As it has ever been, gifts are the secret to popularity. That and having the power to behead anyone who dislikes you.)

Tress and her mother arrived at the back of the crowd, but Holmes the baker waved them up on his steps so they could see better. He was a kind man, always saving the ends of loaves, then selling them to her for pennies.

So it was that Tress had a good view of the princess as she appeared on the deck. She was beautiful. Rosy cheeks, shimmering hair, delicate features. She was so perfect, the finest painter in the seas couldn't have made improvements in her portrait.

Charlie had at last been able to become part of a story. With effort, Tress was happy for him.

The duke appeared next, waving his hand so the people knew to cheer for him. "I present," he shouted, "my heir!"

A young man stepped up onto the deck beside the princess. And it was most definitely *not* Charlie.

This young man was around the same age as Charlie, but he was six and a half feet tall and had a jaw so straight it made other men question if they were. He bulged with muscles—to the point that when he lifted his arm to wave, Tress swore she could hear the seams on his shirt begging for mercy.

What under the twelve moons?

"After an unfortunate accident," the duke proclaimed to the hushed crowd, "I was forced to adopt my nephew Dirk and appoint him as my new heir." He gave a moment for the crowd to take that in. "He's an excellent fencer," the duke continued, "and responds to questions with single-sentence answers. Sometimes using only one word! Also, he's a war hero. He lost ten thousand men in the Battle of Lakeprivy."

"Ten thousand?" Tress's mother said. "My, that's a lot."

"We shall now celebrate Dirk's marriage to the princess of Dormancy!" the duke shouted, raising his hands high.

The crowd remained quiet, still confused.

"I brought thirty kegs!" the duke shouted.

They cheered. And so, a party it was. The townspeople led the way up to the feast hall. They remarked on the princess's beauty and marveled that Dirk managed to balance so well while walking, considering his center of gravity must have been located somewhere around his upper sternum.

Tress's mother told her she would get answers, and followed the crowd. However, when Tress came out of her shock, she found Flik —one of the duke's servants—waving to her from near the bottom of the gangplank. He was a kindly man, with wide ears that looked as if they were waiting for the right moment to bolt and fly away.

"Flik?" she whispered. "What happened? An accident? Where is Charlie?"

Flik glanced up at the train of people walking to the feast hall. The duke and his family had joined them, and were far enough away that any scowls would lose their potency due to wind resistance and gravitational drop.

"He wanted me to give you this," Flik said, handing her a small sack. It tinkled as she took it. Inside were broken pieces of ceramic.

The fifth cup.

"He tried so hard, Miss Tress," Flik whispered. "Oh, you should have seen the young master. He did everything he could to put those women off. He memorized eighty-seven different types of plywood and their uses. He told every princess he met—at length—about his childhood pets. He even talked about *religion*. I thought they had 'im at the fifth kingdom, as that princess was deaf, but the young master went and threw up on her at dinner."

"He *threw up*?"

"Straight in 'er lap, Miss Tress." Flik looked both ways, then waved for her to follow as he carried some luggage off the docks, leading them to a more secluded location. "But his father got wise, Miss Tress. Figured out what the young master was doing. The duke got right mad. Right mad indeed."

He gestured to the broken cup she was carrying in her sack.

"Yes, but what happened to *Charlie*?" Tress asked.

Flik looked away.

"*Please*," Tress asked. "Where is he?"

"He sailed the Midnight Sea, Miss Tress," he said. "Beneath Thanasmia's own moon. The Sorceress took him."

Those names sent a chill through Tress. The Midnight Sea? The domain of the *Sorceress*? "Why would he ever do such a thing?"

"Well, I right think it's because his father forced him to," Flik said. "The Sorceress isn't married. And the king has long wanted to try to make her less of a threat. So…"

"The king sent *Charlie* to try to *marry* the *Sorceress*?"

Flik didn't respond.

"No," Tress said, realizing it. "He sent Charlie to die."

"I didn't say anything like that," Flik said, hurrying off. "If anyone asks, I didn't say *anything* like that."

Numb, Tress sat down on one of the dock pillars. She listened to the spores stirring, a sound like pouring sand. Even on an out-of-the-way island like hers, they knew of the Sorceress. She periodically sent ships in to raid the borders of the Verdant Sea, and it was incredibly difficult to fight her. Her stronghold lay hidden somewhere in the remote Midnight Sea, most dangerous of them all. And to get to it you had to cross the Crimson Sea, an unpopulated sea that was only slightly less deadly.

Finding out Charlie had been captured by her was like finding out he'd gone up to one of the moons. Tress couldn't just take one man's word. Not on something like this. She didn't dare bother others with questions, but she listened as the servants talked in hushed tones to inquisitive dock workers, eager to get the ship unloaded so they could join the party. They all gave similar answers. Yes, Charlie had been sent to the Midnight Sea. The duke and the king had decided it together, so it must have been a good idea. After all, someone had to try to stop the Sorceress from raiding. And Charlie, of all people, was…erm…the obvious choice…for…reasons.

The implications horrified Tress. The duke and the king had realized Charlie was being difficult, and their solution had been to simply get rid of him. Dirk had been instated as heir within hours of receiving word that Charlie's ship had vanished.

In the eyes of the nobles, this was an elegant result. The duke got an heir he could finally be proud of. The king got an advantageous marriage alliance in Dirk's bride from another kingdom. And everyone got to blame another death on the Sorceress, building public opinion toward another war.

After three days, Tress at last dared impose on Brunswick—the duke's steward—with a plea for more information. As he liked her

pies, he admitted that they'd received a ransom letter from the Sorceress. But the duke, in his wisdom, had judged it to be a trick to lure more ships into the Midnight Sea. The king had declared Charlie officially dead.

Days passed. Tress lived them in a daze, realizing nobody cared. They called it *politics* and moved on. Though the new heir had the intellect of a soggy piece of bread, he was popular, handsome, and very good at getting other people killed. While Charlie had been… well, Charlie.

Tress spent weeks gathering her courage, then went to ask the duke if he'd please pay the ransom. Such a bold move was difficult for her. She wasn't a coward, but imposing upon people…well, it simply wasn't something she did. But with her parents' encouragement, she made the long trek and quietly made her request.

The duke, in turn, called her a "hazelnut-haired strumpet" and forbade her from washing windows anywhere in town. She was forced to begin knitting socks with her parents for greatly reduced pay.

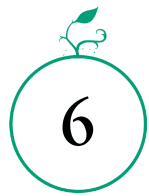
As the weeks passed, Tress fell into a lethargy. She felt less like a mere human being, and more like a human who was merely being.

Life on the Rock for everyone else returned to normal, easy as that. Nobody cared. Nobody was going to do anything.

Until it was, two months after the duke's return, that Tress made her decision. There *was* somebody who cared. Naturally, it would be up to that person to do something. Tress couldn't impose on anyone else.

She was going to have to go rescue Charlie herself.

PART
2



6

Once Tress made the decision, a knot came undone within her—like she'd finally worked a tangle out of a stubborn lock of hair.

She would do it. She had no idea *how*, but she *would* find a way to get off the island, cross the terrible Crimson Sea, enter the Midnight Sea, and rescue Charlie. Yes, each of those problems seemed equally impossible. But somehow less impossible than imagining the rest of her life without him.

First though, Tress went to talk to her parents. (Something more people in stories such as this should do.) She sat them both down, then explained her love for Charlie, her realization that no one would help him, and her determination to go find him—though she expressed worry that her absence might cause them hardship.

Both listened quietly as she spoke. This was, in part, because she'd baked them quail-egg pies. It's more difficult to object to your daughter's temporary insanity when your mouth is full.

Once she'd finished, Lem asked for seconds. It was a two-pie type of predicament. Ulba only finished half of her meal, sitting back and leaving the rest untouched. It was also a half-pie type of predicament.

Tress's father ate his second pie with deliberate care, digging down from the top, then eating outward, saving the crust for the end. Finally, he crunched through that. Then he stared at the plate

for a long, uncomfortable moment.

Was it…perhaps…a *three*-pie predicament?

"I think," he said at last, turning to Ulba, "we are going to have to let her do this."

"It's lunacy!" Tress's mother said. "Leave the island? Travel to the Midnight Sea? Steal a prisoner from *the Sorceress*?"

Lem felt at his mustache bristles with his napkin, cleaning out remnants of the meal. "Ulba, would you say our daughter is more practical than we are?"

"Yes, I would normally say that," Ulba said.

"And would you also say she is more thoughtful than we are?"

"She is always thinking," Tress's mother agreed.

"How often does she impose upon people or ask for what she wants?"

"Almost never."

"With all that in mind," Tress's father said, "it must be the right decision for her to leave. She will have considered all other options. Leaving the island to rescue the man she loves might sound like lunacy, but if every other option has been discarded as impossible, then insanity might—in this case—be *practical*."

Tress felt a small thrill inside. He agreed?

"Tress," her father said, leaning forward, resting his once-powerful arms on the tabletop, "we can care for your brother and ourselves if you go. Please do not worry about us; you are too accommodating in this regard. But neither of us can go with you. You understand this?"

"Yes, Father," she said.

"I had always wondered if this island would prove too small for one such as you."

This made Tress frown.

"Why do you act like that?" he asked her.

"I don't want to be rude."

"Then I demand you tell me, so that not speaking would be even more rude."

Her grimace worsened. "Well, why would you say the island is too small for me, Father? There's nothing extraordinary about me. If anything, I am too small for it."

"Everything is extraordinary about you, Tress," her mother said. "That's why nothing in particular stands out."

Well, parents have to say things like that. They're required to see

the best in their children, otherwise living with the little sociopaths would drive a person mad.

"I have your blessing then?" Tress asked them.

"I still think this is a terrible idea," Ulba noted.

Lem nodded. "It is. But a terrible idea executed brilliantly has to be better than a brilliant idea executed terribly. I mean, look at pelicans."

"True," Tress's mother said. "But are we capable of *either* kind of brilliance?"

"No," Tress said. "But maybe we can take a whole lot of little steps that, when looked at together, might seem brilliant to somebody who doesn't know us."

And so, they set to work. Tress was keenly aware that Charlie might be suffering, but she resolved to take her time. If she *was* going to do something as stupid as leave the island, she figured she should be meticulous about it. Perhaps that would dilute the stupidity with time, like how good flour could dilute the stale and improve the bake.

She took to knitting socks at the cliffside so she could watch the ships that came and left. Her mother began to make stockings at a table near the dock so she could take notes. They compared their findings each night, with Tress's father listening and offering his thoughts.

Though Tress had always possessed a curiosity about the mechanics of shipping, she now had a motive to learn the details. There were two types of people who regularly left the island. The first was, of course, the crews of the various ships. When they landed, they'd come ashore to shop or visit the local taverns. The Rock didn't have much to recommend it, but Brick's ale was known as some of the best in the region. Plus, with enough of it in you, the rest of the amenities looked a whole lot better.

The second type of people who left the Rock were government officials. Not only the duke and his family, but other royal administrators, such as tax collectors, royal messengers, and cargo inspectors. They were allowed to leave when they saw fit. Members of the nobility who visited could also leave—and they usually did so quickly, after realizing their awful mistake.

Tress's biggest challenge would be the current cargo inspector. The severe woman authenticated the writs of visiting merchants, then examined cargo for stowaways. For a place where no one

wanted to live, the Rock certainly had lots of *things* people wanted. Salt from the mines, Brick's ale, even down and feathers from the gulls.

The townspeople couldn't sell these things except to ships that had a writ of commission from the king. The cargo inspector oversaw it all. When the current one had arrived earlier in the year, she'd refused to give her name, insisting they simply call her "Inspector." She claimed she wouldn't be remaining on the Rock long enough for names to matter.

Tress couldn't remember an inspector who had been more strict. This woman was always watching, swinging the rod she carried, searching for any excuse to deliver a punishment. She seemed too stern to be fully human. As if instead of being born, she'd been spawned—and instead of growing up, she'd metastasized.

Tress and her mother spent hours covertly studying how the inspector searched outgoing shipments. Bags of feathers were weighed, while barrels of salt were stabbed, to search for possible stowaways. But some things being shipped—like large kegs of the local brew—couldn't be opened without spoiling them. What if a person were to hide in a keg? Could they fill it with something like salt to make it weigh and balance correctly?

Unfortunately, the inspector had an answer to such potential escape plans. When examining kegs, she employed a special listening device, like the ones physicians used for hearts. The inspector would linger on each keg, listening for someone moving or breathing inside. Reportedly, the inspector had extremely good hearing and could detect the very heartbeats of stowaways.

Was there a way around this? A way to exploit the situation?

One night, two weeks after she'd first decided to leave, Tress sat up with a notebook full of ideas. The Emerald Moon shone bright as always, stoic and immobile in the sky. Spores poured downward in the distance, like crystalline moonlight.

Her father limped over, settled down, then waved for her to show him her plans. He read them carefully, then nodded. "This could work."

"It *could*," Tress said, yawning. "But I don't think it will. I might be able to fool a bunch of sailors, but I'd never fool Brick, Gremmy, or Sor. They will know that something is wrong." She rubbed her eyes. She'd been going without sleep, fraught as she was. (Worry, it might be said, is the carrion feeder of emotions. Drawn to other,

better emotions like crows to a battlefield.)

"Perhaps you don't have to fool them," her father said. "Perhaps they would be willing to help."

"I couldn't ask that of them," Tress said. "What if the inspector catches me? The others would get into too much trouble."

Her father nodded again. That was, of course, the sort of thing Tress would say. So he suggested she go to bed. Tress looked as if she were about to fall asleep in the middle of the conversation—which was saying something, considering how many of Charlie's stories she'd survived without so much as a yawn.

After she went upstairs, Lem retrieved his cane, put on his coat, and went out to do some advanced fathering.

THE FATHER

Lem was not a poor man.

Now, you might say to me, “Hoid, this entire story has shown me the opposite. Lem’s family is always scrimping to survive.” And I would reply, “Please stop interrupting.”

Lem was not poor, he simply didn’t have a lot of money.

That night as Tress slept, Lem limped down the long road to Brick’s tavern. He knew for certain that Gremmy and Sor would be there. After all, the tavern didn’t close until two.

Lem hobbled in. It was still early enough that the place was happy and boisterous. Evenings at the tavern, as you know, are like fires in a hearth. They live two lives.

There’s the part where they’re roaring, festive, and cheerful. Then the evening begins to drift. The tavern becomes colder, darker, and quieter. Those who populate the tavern during its second life don’t want companionship. Just company.

That was a few hours away, so Lem passed laughing miners sharing rounds and chatting about their boring boring. He spotted Gremmy and Sor together, as they often were. The dockworker and the dockmaster looked like opposite ends of a tack. Gremmy—with his squat body and flat head—had a haircut that said, “What’s the cheapest?” Sor was ostensibly Gremmy’s boss, but rarely brought the matter up, in case it might accidentally sound like he was

offering to pay the tab. He sat tall and straight, and sipped at a beer because he didn't want to be seen drinking the wine that he could afford.

Brick, of course, was behind the bar, standing on his stool to be at eye height to his patrons. Tress needed all three men's help, but Lem didn't approach any of them. Instead he took up position near the dartboard. Jule was playing, and offered Lem the next game, which he happily accepted.

Lem threw the first dart several feet below the board, hitting the wood there on one of two knots that bore holes from a large number of darts.

Jule eyed it approvingly and took his own throw, hitting near Lem's.

"I heard," Lem said, taking his second throw, "you helped Gremmy with his tab again. Right nice of you, that was."

Jule nodded in appreciation.

Next game was against old Rod, the innkeeper. Lem missed his first two throws, unfortunately. One was so off, it hit the dartboard. The third hit far beneath it though.

"Nice," Rod said. "Does that cane help with your balance, Lem? I swear you've gotten better at darts since the accident."

"Having a cane doesn't help with darts, Rod," Lem said. "Havin' nothing to do though…"

Rod grunted.

"You still help Brick with the brewing on weekends?" Lem asked.

"More often than not," Rod said, and took his throws. After that Rod moved off, making way for another game, and another. As men came to play Lem, they read the unspoken script of his questions.

They remembered that time when Rod had been drunk, and Lem had helped him home. And Jule, when he'd lost his roof during the windstorm, Lem had helped build a new one. There were dozens of similar stories. Lem was the human equivalent of a deep, pure well, always full of water when you needed it. He'd offer what you needed and ask nothing in return. In fact, he'd never bring it up again.

Unless it was urgent.

Unless it was important.

In those cases, well, Lem might have been poor in the kind of currency that paid taxes. But he was downright *wealthy* when it came to the kind of currency that mattered.

Word got around that night. Lem needed something, specifically from Gremmy, Sor, and Brick. Lem—the man with no debt—needed this favor so badly, he almost *asked* for it. In the language of men like these, that's the equivalent of begging.

Lem continued playing darts, and scored quite well. If you're wondering at the odd targets they used, it should be noted that—one evening a couple years earlier—someone had noticed that a group of knots high on the wall looked an awful lot like a face. The duke's face, in fact, if you imagined the grain of that wood as his hair, and the dart board as the family insignia on his chest.

And, well, somewhere below that were two prominent knots in the wall. Right above where the legs would have been.

Lem threw, and nearby men winced. "Nice," one noted.

As the night progressed, quiet, invisible ledgers were tallied. Decisions were reached, but not spoken. They didn't need to be, for the next morning—too early for any of them—Tress found the barkeep, the dockmaster, and the dockworker on her doorstep. They *demanded* to help her in whatever she was doing.

So it was that a little over a week later, a large keg was deposited on the dock for inspection. Gremmy pushed it up alongside five others.

The perfect ship had arrived for executing Tress's plan, a vessel known as the *Oot's Dream*. It needed to be a ship with a crew that didn't often visit Diggen's Point, and it needed a king's writ authorizing the purchase of Brick's ale.

The sailors of the *Oot's Dream* nearly took the kegs on board without inspection, but the captain had read the terms of his writ. "There is supposed to be an inspection, is there not?" he demanded. "We cannot leave port until it has been done."

So, the inspector was summoned. She arrived with a scowl that could have killed spores, her rod held at the ready to deal out justice. She examined the first keg, then used her listening device on it.

Nearby, Sor peered at his pocket watch, counting the seconds, his heart thumping. Gremmy mopped his head as the inspector moved down the line of kegs. Brick nudged him, trying to urge him to not look so suspicious.

Finally, the inspector listened to the last large keg. Just big enough for a girl to curl up inside, it was. The inspector listened closely, and found…nothing.

She waved for the cargo to be loaded. The three conspirators exchanged glances. Until the inspector paused and turned back. Then in a sudden motion, she kicked over the last keg.

It went *thump*.

Then it went *ouch*.

"I thought so!" the inspector said, grabbing a crowbar from the dock, then prying the keg's top free to reveal the truth—a raven-haired young woman hiding inside, trying to sneak off the island. "Feathers as insulation!" the inspector cried. "You thought that would muffle the sounds enough to fool *my* ear?"

Well, after that, things went downhill at speed. "This couldn't have been managed without help!" the inspector snapped at the dockmaster. "This couldn't have been managed without a *conspiracy*!"

Poor Gremmy couldn't take it, and started bawling right there. Brick tried to quiet him, while Sor wondered out loud if maybe he could order Gremmy to take his punishment for him.

"The king has worried about your disloyalty," the inspector said with a sneer. "He warned me about the people of this town. He will be told of this, that you all worked *together* to circumvent his laws. Pay for only five kegs, Captain."

The other five kegs were loaded onto the ship, and the ship took off toward the Emerald Sea's Core Archipelago to deliver the ale. The inspector went with them—leaving her assistant to watch the docks—declaring she would tell the king personally of the betrayal at Diggen's Point.

Now, you might have noticed that the young woman in the barrel was not Tress, and you might think she was actually in one of the other kegs. She was not.

Tress was not hiding in some other piece of cargo.

Tress was not hiding at all.

Tress was the inspector.

THE STOWAWAY

8

Tress thought she could see the real inspector arriving on the docks in the distance. A tiny irate figure who gestured in anger at the fleeing ship. She would be told that the captain had insisted on leaving without inspection. By now, Gret—the dockmaster's daughter—would have climbed out of the hollow keg and left. There would be no other witnesses left on the Rock except for Brick, Gremmy, and Sor—whose debts had now been paid.

Just like that, Tress was free. This time, Diggen's Point was the thing that grew smaller and smaller in the distance. Practically everything and everyone that Tress had ever known lived on that island. And soon she wouldn't even be able to see it.

Leaving didn't feel exciting. It felt heavy. Every child looked forward to the day when they could choose a different path from the one their parents were on. Tress sincerely hoped she hadn't decided on one that led straight off a cliff.

But she *was* free. She'd escaped without a hitch. She wondered if maybe her other tasks would be accomplished with similar ease. She could wonder this because—lacking formal training in the arts—Tress had no concept of dramatic irony.

She turned her gaze to the sky. It was so *blue* out here, away from the mining smog. That felt immoral somehow, as if she were seeing the sky without its clothing. The air smelled…not of salt anymore,

but pure and clean. And dangerous. No salt meant free spores.

Fortunately, the deck's railing was lined with silver. And surely people wouldn't travel the Emerald Sea if it weren't *reasonably* safe. The ship's sails billowed and shook as the vessel turned, sailors calling to one another as they worked. They'd been forced to take her; the king's writs of purchase obligated captains to ferry government officials who required passage away from the Rock.

So the crew left Tress alone as she stood at the back of the ship, on the quarterdeck, near the wheel where the captain chatted with the helmsman. Tress wore an inspector's uniform, with a bright red and gold coat going down past her knees. They'd stolen it the night before; it was the spare one from the inspector's closet. Tress's mother had altered it perfectly to appear as if it had been made for Tress. And, of course, a "mistake" on the dock register in the inspector's room had indicated the wrong time for the *Oot's Dream* to leave the Rock, so she'd shown up late.

The only things Tress had brought with her were a small bundle of clothing and a bag of cups. Her favorite among them was the fourth cup that Charlie had sent. The one with the butterfly on it. Something about the simple design struck her.

She was glad the sailors ignored her, because it was difficult to cover up how much she gawked at the green spore ocean. Tress wasn't aware of the science of what made the ship float, but it's actually rather interesting. Vents deep below on the ocean floor sent up bursts of air. With this agitation, the spores became as liquid. The phenomenon is possible on any world, including your own. Fluidization, it's called. Pump air up underneath a box of sand, and you'll see something similar to what Tress was watching.

Bubbles burst from the spores all around, making the ocean churn and undulate. It slapped the ship's hull and flowed away, splashing, making waves. It wasn't *quite* like water; it was too thick, and the tips of the waves broke apart into puffs of green spores. In fact, the sea was wrong in the way that solely something almost right can be. Familiar, yet alien. As if it were liquid's disrespectful cousin who told inappropriate jokes at Grandma's funeral.

The ship sailed like any ship would on water. But it could move only as long as the air bubbled up from below; the people on Tress's world called this phenomenon "the seethe." It came and went randomly, fluidizing entire oceans for days at a time. Periodically it would cease—stranding all the ships sailing upon it. Interruptions

were usually short, but occasionally lasted hours or even days.

A wave broke high against the side of the ship, tossing up a burst of spores. Tress cried out despite herself and backed away, but the spores turned grey, dying.

"Haven't sailed much, eh?" the captain asked from nearby. He had terrible breath, a crispy tan complexion, and stringy, matted hair. Imagine him as the answer to the question: "What if that gunk from your shower drain were to come to life?"

Still, he was the best option Tress had found in her weeks of watching, so she wasn't going to complain. Even if he did laugh at her again the next time the spores surged.

"We have silver enough," the captain said, waving toward the trim on the railing and built into the wood of the deck. A line of it ran up the mast. "Kills any spores that come too close, Inspector. You're safe."

Tress nodded, trying to look as if she didn't care. But she kept her coat buttoned up tight and found herself breathing shallowly and wishing for a salted mask.

Instead, she brought out her notebook and worked on her plan. She'd made it off the island. Next, she needed only to wait. The vessel would deliver her to the king's island in the Core Archipelago. From there, Tress had to find her way into the palace so she could get a copy of Charlie's ransom note.

That would be the easiest way to free him. Yes, paying off a ransom herself would be next to impossible, but it *did* seem easier than sneaking across the Midnight Sea to confront the Sorceress. Hopefully if she could find a way to pay—or persuade the king to pay—Charlie would be delivered to her, safe.

The deck creaked as the captain stepped nearer. "You have beautiful hair, Inspector," he said. "The color of a good cup of mead!"

Tress snapped her book closed. "Perhaps I will retire to my cabin now."

He smiled. The man was exactly the sort of person who thought every woman in the room was thinking about him. Which they were, as each desperately hoped he would head the other direction. He waved for Tress to join him in walking down from the quarterdeck toward the cabins below it.

Thankfully, the captain left her without needing to be ordered. The room was small but private, and the door locked. Tress felt a

great deal better once she was safe inside. She poured some water into her butterfly cup and settled onto the bunk to think.

It all felt so much more *real* now. Was she really doing this? Had she *really* left her home? What were those strange colorful pigeons, and why were they talking to her?

This last part was a side effect of the poison the captain had ordered put in Tress's drink. There are, unfortunately, no talking pigeons in this story. Merely talking rats.

THE RAT

9

Tress awoke. That was nice.

Tress very much approved of not dying on the first day of her adventure. However, she had a pounding headache, and all she could see was blackness. Did one see blackness, or was it the mark of not seeing? Can you hear silence? Taste nothing?

Well, judging by the creaking of the wood, she was in the ship's hold. She groaned and sat up, then felt around. Her fingers met bars. She was in a cage.

"You won't find a way out," said a quiet voice. It sounded male, but had a pinched quality to it, like someone had taken the speaker's words and was squeezing out the juice.

"Who are you?" Tress asked softly.

"A fellow prisoner. I heard them talking about you. You're an inspector?"

"Yes," Tress lied. "For the king. I can't believe they'd dare assault me."

On the inside, Tress was panicking. The captain must have figured out her ruse. The ship would be returning to Diggen's Point to find the real inspector, and everything would fall apart.

No. It had *already* fallen apart.

She sat down, her back to some bars.

"Lunatic choice you made, Inspector," the voice said. "You

boarded the ship alone? How did you *think* this would play out? Were you planning to take them all on your own?"

"Take them?" Tress asked. "Where?"

"You…don't know?"

In case you're new to this, nothing good ever follows a question like that.

"This is a smugglers' vessel," the voice explained. "They *forged* mercantile writs from the king. It lets them buy and sell goods without paying tariffs."

Tress groaned, thumping her head against the bars. "And they thought I was suspicious of them. They thought *that's* why I got on their ship."

"It wasn't?" the voice said, then started laughing. Or rather, Tress thought it was laughter. It came out as a high-pitched series of squeaks—like the sound of a hyperventilating donkey. "It was completely coincidental? Oh, you poor woman."

Tress folded her arms tight in the darkness, suffering the mockery. At least she wasn't going to be taken back to Diggen's Point to be turned in to the duke. Instead the smugglers would undoubtedly murder her and dispose of the body.

She decided not to cry. Crying would be utterly impractical. So it was settled. Absolutely no crying.

Her eyes vetoed the resolution.

"Hey," the voice said. "Hey, it's all right. At least you got off the Rock, right?"

"You know about the Rock?" Tress asked, wiping her eyes. Stupid things. Probably just wanted something to do, with the not seeing and all.

"I was on my way there for a visit," the voice said, "before the sailors found me out. Locked me in here."

"Why would you *visit* Diggen's Point?" Tress demanded.

"I have my reasons," the voice said. "My kind are mysterious like that."

"Your kind?" Tress asked.

"Here, let me show you. Might want to shade your eyes."

A moment later light poured into the chamber, spilling from a small hole in the hull. Tress blinked, pushing her frazzled hair out of her eyes as she made out her surroundings. She was in a cell built into part of the ship's hold, maybe four feet on each side and not much taller.

Across from her, lashed on top of some boxes, was a much smaller cage. In it sat a common black rat. He'd pulled a cork from the hole with his little paws.

"I keep this thing plugged," he said, "so they don't know about it. Don't want them to move the cage, you know? I…"

The rat trailed off as he turned and saw her for the first time, then cocked his head.

"What?" Tress asked.

The rat was silent. The only sounds came from the ship rocking in the spores and the boots thumping on the deck above. Tress pulled back. She didn't like the way the rat stared at her with those beady little eyes.

"*What?*" she demanded.

"Didn't get a good look at you when they brought you down. I didn't realize…didn't expect you to be so young. You're no royal inspector."

"I have a young face."

"I'm sure," the rat said. He moved to the edge of his cage and sat on his haunches, leaning forward, tiny paws together. It was a very ratlike pose, which Tress supposed made sense.

"You're sneaking off the island," he said. "Why under the moons would you do that?"

"I told you," Tress snapped. "Nobody *wants* to be on Diggen's Point. Anyway, the sailors bought my act, so you don't need to keep staring at me like that. My escape plan worked."

"Save for the whole 'accidentally frightening a bunch of smugglers' part, I assume."

Tress wiped her eyes once more. "Can we maybe backtrack on this conversation? It looks like we missed the main roadway. I don't mean to be rude, but *you* are a *rat*."

"Seems self-evident."

"But you're talking."

"Again, self-evident."

"Yes, but…but *how*?"

"With my mouth," he said. "Also, reference my previous answer."

She bit her lip. It was a testament to her state of mind that she'd pushed him that far already. Was asking a talking rat why he could talk impolite? She probably would have been offended if someone had asked *her* why she could talk.

The rat moved to pick up the cork. "There's a story behind how I

can talk, I suppose. It's not one I'm interested in telling."

"Huh," Tress said.

"What?"

"It's just…I'm not used to people saying things like that."

The rat nibbled a bit on the cork, then moved it toward the hole.

"Could you leave the hole open?" Tress asked. "A little longer?"

The rat sighed, as he nearly had the cork positioned. But he lowered it to the cage floor again. The boots up above were stomping around quickly. Perhaps they were changing course?

"So…smugglers," Tress said.

"Smugglers," the rat agreed, sniffing the air. "Got caught chewing on their rations, and had to either give up my secret and talk, or get tossed overboard as a pest. Turns out they think a talking rat might be worth something. I considered warning them I didn't have anything interesting to say, then thought it unwise to give them reason to doubt my value." The rat gnawed more on the cork. "Because of the impending war, every second captain is a smuggler these days. So you shouldn't feel too bad for falling in with some."

"The war?" Tress asked.

"With the Sorceress," the rat said. "She's been sending more ships in to raid, and the king has been building up his forces—commandeering merchant vessels like a child reaching for treats. Seeing how easily you can find yourself conscripted these days, it's no wonder so many sailors are having a bout of prolapsed morals, so to speak."

"Do you think I could deal with them?" Tress said. "Explain that I'm not actually an inspector?"

"Oh, suddenly you aren't?"

"I'm whatever gets me out of this cage. A friend of mine is in trouble, and I need to rescue him."

"Him?" the rat said. "You left your home for a man?"

Tress remained silent.

"Hon, no man is worth getting killed over," the rat said. "If you manage to escape, you should head on home to your rock."

"He's not just any man," Tress said. "And—"

She cut off as a loud *pop* sounded somewhere outside. Tress cocked her head. What an odd noise to hear out on the ocean. Whatever could it be?

Fate answered her by sending a cannonball, priority delivery, right through the ship's hull.

10

The cannonball crashed through the far wall and soared across the center of the hold. When it hit the opposite wall, it burst into shards of wet ceramic and what looked like metal beads. Those scattered to the floor, mixing with splinters of broken wood. The deck above clamored with the sounds of scrambling feet and screaming men.

"What's happening?" Tress shouted toward the rat.

He'd pulled back against the far corner of his cage, cringing and shivering. "We're being attacked!"

"I mean," Tress said, "what can you see out there? Go look through your hole!"

Though the cannonball had left a rather large second hole, it wasn't close to Tress and didn't let her see much of the outside world. Unnervingly, each time the ship crossed a wave, the new hole sank low enough to let spores spill in. She could see *those* just fine.

"I spot one other ship," the rat said. "Can't see a flag."

"Pirates?" Tress asked.

"Pirates shouldn't be firing, at least not without demanding surrender first," the rat said. "What's the good of sinking all your potential booty under an ocean of spores? Must be a royal ship who found out this lot were smugglers, and decided to deal with them the civilized way."

“Civilized?” Tress screamed as another shot sounded outside. This one appeared to miss, fortunately.

“Takes a civilization to build a cannon. What? You think there are forests out there growing them spontaneously?”

Each pop of the cannon made her wince, but the immediate danger was those spores. As the ship rocked, more and more of them flooded the hold, covering the floor, spreading toward her in a green pool. Some of the spores died, turning a dull grey, but the silver in the deck above was far enough away that many survived. Inching closer to her cage each time the ship climbed a wave and tipped the floor in her direction.

Though sometimes described as dust, aether spores are thicker—more like fine sand. So they don’t float around in the air like dust does, without a strong breeze. Tress pulled her shirt collar up over her mouth anyway, watching with terror.

For the spores were rolling toward the fragments of the broken cannonball—and the water it had sprayed all over the wall. In that moment, Tress was given a crash course in naval warfare upon the spore seas. Yes, the enemy *could* have used uninteresting metal cannonballs. Instead they used ones designed to blast open and dump water—making each shot far more interesting. (Assuming you, like me, find creative deaths interesting.)

Some living spores finally touched the water.

They grew in a flash. Imagine lightning, but made of vines. They burgeoned, sweeping around one another, almost instantly growing into a jagged pattern some ten feet tall. Within moments a snarl of vines—vaguely shaped like a tree—had grown in the hold, with vine “roots” cracking the wood underneath and vine “branches” pushing up to bow the deck above.

Tress couldn’t help imagining some of those spores growing /her mouth or nose. She got a few things wrong, but she understood the basics.

In case you have a more limited imagination, it begins with a feeling like hands forcing your jaws apart. Then vines fill your throat, growing wherever they can find space, snaking down into your lungs. They knock loose teeth, and drill up through your soft palate and into your sinuses. They don’t usually reach your brain though, so you get the pleasure of suffocating to death as you feel the vines rip your eyes out of their sockets.

You’re welcome.

Fortunately for Tress, a sailor soon stumbled down the steps with a lantern, wearing a cloth mask and bearing some odd equipment. Among it was a strange device called a splintbox. (A device which—I happen to know by pure coincidence—is exactly the right size to carry a human head.)

The sailor held the splintbox up beside the hole in the hull, then carefully poured a few drops of water in the top. A sheet of reddish-pink stone grew out the front of the box. Translucent, like cloudy crystal, the stone fused with the wood on the sides, plugging the hole.

The sailor cut the sheet off the front of the box with a silver knife. Every ship on Tress's world had at least one sailor trained to handle and use spores, known as a sprouter.

Tress watched in amazement. She'd heard of that substance: roseite. It grew from the pink-red spores of the Rose Sea, which bordered her own Emerald Sea. Unlike the Crimson Sea or the Midnight Sea, the Rose Sea was inhabited—which meant its spores weren't *quite* as deadly as others'. Still, it seemed plenty dangerous to her. Growing vines in your mouth was bad enough. Crystals sounded even worse.

Yet the sailor had casually used them to *repair* the ship, leaving the roseite on the hole like a bandage.

You could *use* spores? For practical purposes?

Just like that, Tress's lesson in naval warfare was shoved aside by a lesson in utilitarian economics.

With the hole patched, the sprouter unslung the device he'd been carrying over his shoulder; it looked like a pole with a plate on the bottom end. When he waved it over the floor, the remaining green spores turned grey. The plate, Tress realized, had to be made of silver.

He gave the vine growth a quick glance, but apparently decided it wouldn't do more harm for the moment, and so left it and walked toward the steps to the upper deck.

"Wait!" Tress called to him, grabbing the bars at the front of her cage. "That has to be a royal ship out there, right? If it's firing on us, rather than demanding ransom or surrender? They're here to exterminate some smugglers."

"Better hope they don't!" the sailor said to her. "You'll go down with us, inspector or not." He made a rude gesture toward her, which on their planet involved flipping his fingers in her direction,

as if flinging water.

"That's my exact point!" Tress said. "If they knew there was a royal inspector on board, do you think they'd be so eager to fire on us?"

The sprouter stared at her a long moment, then scrambled to grab the keys to her cell.

THE THIEF

II

The sight that confronted Tress as she emerged from the hold could have unnerved a dragon. The ship that had been firing on them was far closer than she'd expected—close enough that she could make out the sailors on the deck.

The enemy ship had two cannons, one on the foredeck, one aft. Now, you might have heard stories of great sailing ships with a dozen or more guns on each side. They hadn't reached such heights on Tress's world; many ships had only one cannon, and they kept them on swiveling platforms. Often a ship's crew had a cannonmaster in charge of aiming.

The *Oot's Dream* had a single small cannon on the foredeck. At the moment, the smuggler ship was heeling hard as part of a weaving maneuver, rather than firing.

Tress didn't know sailing mechanics; she simply saw the enemy ship looming and watched with a slack jaw as their front cannon lobbed a shot toward the *Oot's Dream*. It hit the spore sea starboard amidships, and—unlike the cannonball that had broken through the hull earlier—this one smashed on first impact, releasing its cargo of water into the spores.

A treelike burst of vines exploded into existence inches away from Tress. More twisted than a librarian's love life (trust me, they're a strange bunch), it writhed with overlapping tendrils. It

reminded Tress of her hair most mornings, before she got out her brush.

The gnarled vines grabbed hold of the ship, latching onto its gunwale. The vines that strayed near silver greyed and died, like spores did, but they held on tight nonetheless. It seemed this method of bombardment could rip a ship apart, silver or no silver. Either that or the vines would get a good hold and strand the ship in place, leaving it easy pickings.

Tress was shoved aside as sailors with axes rushed over to attack the vines in an attempt to cut the ship free. "That was too close!" the captain said, shouting to the helmsman. "Keep weaving, Gustal!" He stood nearby, and Tress could—regrettably—smell his breath as he spun on the sailor who had pulled her up the steps. "What under the moons are you doing with that woman, Dorp!"

"She's a royal inspector, Cap'n," Dorp said, gesturing to Tress. "I figured maybe if they saw 'er, they wouldn't be so keen on sinkin' us. Cap'n, sir!"

The captain's expression turned from angry to excited. "Dorp, that's the first good idea you've ever had. Drag her to the quarterdeck. Hoist her up high, if you have to, and let's pray to the moons it gives those yaldsons pause!"

Tress bore the treatment with as much dignity as she could manage. They soon had her standing up on the rim of the quarterdeck, waving for everything she had, hoping that the red coat would persuade them to hold their fire.

Unfortunately, the attacking ship either didn't see or didn't care, because the next cannonball hit the quarterdeck bulkhead, smashing through and causing quite a clutter in the captain's cabin.

The sprouter cursed. "What a stupid idea," he snapped, dragging Tress by her collar as he went belowdecks again to check for more leaks and return her to her cage. Unexpectedly, a second after they reached the hold, the ship lurched.

It was so jarring that Tress tripped and fell face-first into the dead spores that covered the floor of the hold. She scrambled to her knees and wiped away the spores with frantic hands, panicking. What if a few live ones remained?

The sprouter had let go of her collar. "No," he said, turning to stare up the steps. "No, no, *no*."

The ship groaned around them, sliding to a halt. Then it fell quiet. Even the footsteps stilled—and it took her a moment to

realize what had happened. The seethe—the bubbles that fluidized the spores—had stopped.

The ship had essentially run aground on the ocean itself. Until the seethe began again, they'd be trapped. Stuck in one place.

"Nononono!" the sprouter cried, forgetting Tress and running up the steps.

The reason for his panic occurred to Tress almost immediately. The enemy cannon was already pointed straight at them. And they were no longer moving.

A second later, a cannonball blasted through the aft hull, ripping a wide hole. Tress screamed and covered her head as the cannonball soared over her and crashed right through the front of the ship, never shattering as it was supposed to.

Tress cowered on the floor, awaiting the next inevitable shot. Then, through the terror, her practicality asserted itself. She turned, shifting wood debris off her back, and looked out through the large new hole in the hull. Across the ocean at the enemy ship, which was also stuck in place several hundred feet away.

The sea had become, essentially, solid. At least as solid as a sand dune. It was made of deadly spores, but it could be walked on. And while the people on that enemy ship *might* wish her harm, those on the *Oot's Dream* most certainly did.

It didn't take long for her to make the decision. She threw herself to her feet and pushed past the vine growth in the hold, making for the hole.

"Watch out!" the rat said from behind as something dropped on her. The sprouter, seeing her move, had leaped off the broken steps above to tackle her.

"Here now," he said. "That's a right good idea. You're gonna give me that coat, and I'm gonna go plead for my life with those fellows." He began to rip at her clothing, and she frantically felt around for a weapon. Her fingers latched onto something metal and she swung it up, clocking the sailor on the head. He dropped like a streaker's trousers.

Tress gasped, panting on the floor, then glanced at what she'd grabbed. A pewter cup.

Wait, *her* pewter cup.

Huh, she thought. *Didn't expect to be right about that.*

She searched around and spotted her things nearby, along with some other items that had been tossed around in the explosion.

Then she cried out as another cannonball hit the ship somewhere above, making men scream.

She grabbed her sack, then stumbled over to the rat's cage. "Almost forgot about you," she said. "Sorry."

"It's a common human failing," he said. "Don't get me started on the way your people talk about my kind."

"Brace yourself," Tress said. "I don't have anything to cut that cage free, so…" She raised her heavy metal cup, then swung it down and broke off the little lock.

The rat shoved out with his snout, then leaped onto her arm and climbed up her shoulder. She supposed that, with spores all over the floor, she didn't blame him for getting up high.

"The name is…" The rat coughed. "The name is…Huck. That'll do, as I don't think my real name will work."

"Something in rat language that a human couldn't say?"

"Basically," he said as she turned and walked over to the hole in the ship. "You?"

"Tress," she said.

"Well then, Tress," Huck said, "you ready to do something absolutely insane?"

"Such is, unfortunately, becoming a theme to my life," Tress said, then stepped out onto the spores.

THE CROW

12

The spores scrunched under her feet.

Tress tried to breathe slowly and shallowly. Even with her shirt once more pulled up over her mouth, she felt exposed. All it would take was a single spore.

Another cannonball *whooshed* overhead, crunching through the ship. However, she walked carefully, slowly, to keep from kicking spores up into the air. Steady and deliberate, that was the way. Despite her entire body being taut with anxiety, knowing that at any moment the seethe could start again—and she'd sink to her death.

"Now that's a sight," Huck said softly from her shoulder.

Tress risked a glance back. For some reason, a flock of seagulls was beginning to gather around the *Oot's Dream*. Several sailors had been wounded in the most recent shot, and one man had fallen off the side of the ship.

He was bleeding.

The poor man thrashed and screamed, spraying blood across the spores—which grew in bursts, undulating and latching onto the ship like enormous tentacles from some unseen leviathan. The sailor disappeared in the contorted explosion of vines, but she could hear him screaming in there somewhere as he was crushed, more and more blood leaking out to feed the hungry ocean. Gulls dived at the

vines and attacked them with apparent gusto. What was that about?

Tress turned forward and continued, step after step, toward the enemy ship. Though it had seemed close from the hold, out here it felt miles away.

"I've never done this before," Huck said from her shoulder. "You know. Walked out on it."

"Me either," Tress said, trying to prevent herself from hyperventilating.

Keep. Moving. Forward.

"I don't mean to alarm you," Huck said, "but the seethe will probably start up again any minute now…"

Tress nodded. She knew the basics. There were long stillings now and then, maybe every day or two, when the seethe stopped for several hours. There were times when it would stop for a day or more, though those were rare.

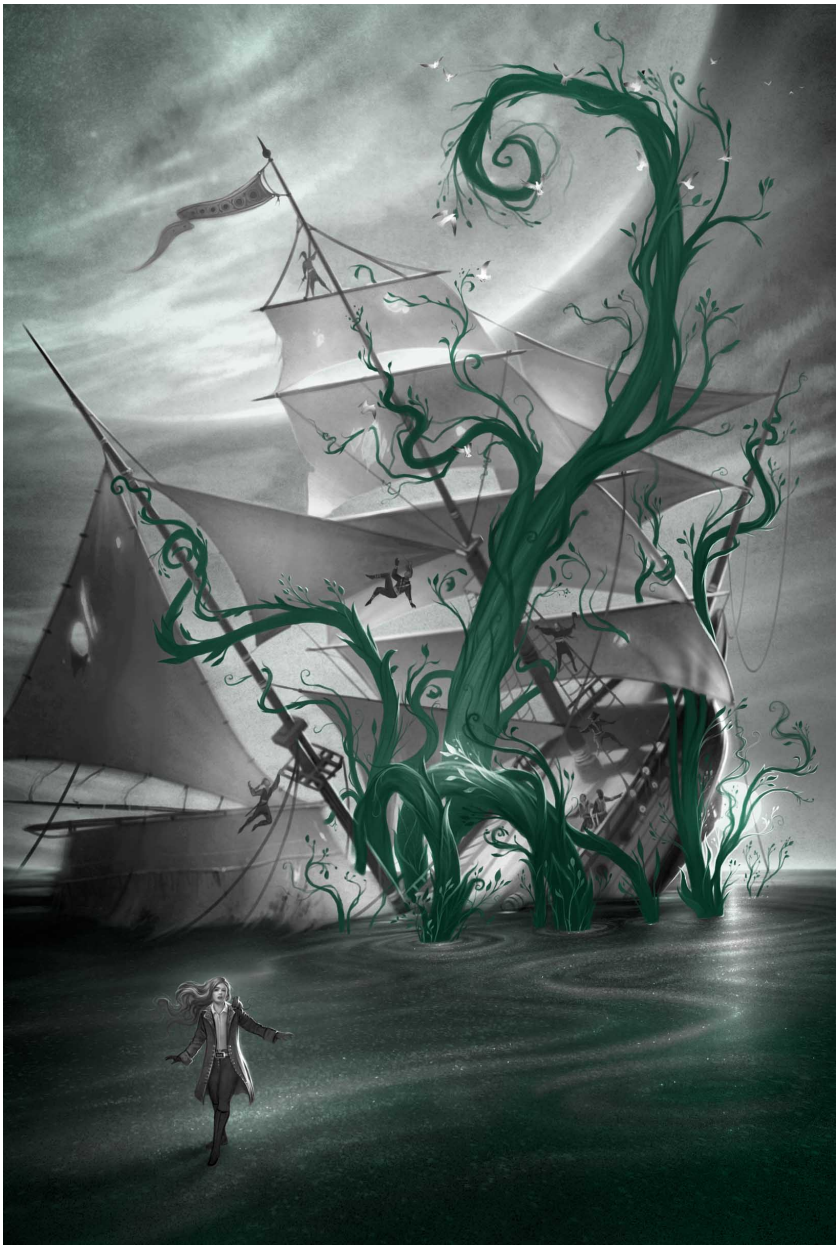
Most stillings were only a few minutes long. As if the seethe were some singer deep under the ocean, pausing briefly to draw in another breath.

She tried to pick up her pace, but the spores were deceptively difficult to walk on. Her feet slid, and moons above, she hadn't laced her boots tight enough. She could feel spores getting into her shoes, slipping between the fibers of her socks and rubbing against her skin.

How much sweat would it take to set one off?

Just keep moving.

Step. After. Step.



She heard scrunching noises approaching and glanced behind her. One of the smugglers had seen what she was doing, and was running toward the enemy ship. He was kicking up so many spores. She tensed, bracing herself, worried that—

Snap. A mess of vines burst from his eyes, and he dropped,

writhing, making more grow up around him. Tress kept going, but another sailor passed her, walking with a confident steady stride. Faster than she dared.

They were over halfway to the other ship.

Please, Emerald Moon, she prayed. *Please. Just a little more time.*

She could see sailors gathering on the foredeck of the other ship. They'd stopped firing. They didn't need weapons any longer. The smuggler ship cracked and popped in the distance as an overwhelming number of vines grew up on the side where the bleeding sailor had fallen.

Tress felt the eyes of the enemy sailors on her. One figure in particular—standing right at the prow of the ship, wearing a hat with a tall black feather—looked ominous. The shadowed figure raised a long musket and aimed straight at Tress.

Then the figure turned slightly. The musket shook, and the crack sounded a fraction of a second later. The sailor who had been striding toward the ship in front of Tress dropped, his blood starting another eldritch spire of twisting vines.

Tress stopped, then braced herself for a second shot. When it didn't come, she started forward again. It was too late to turn back, and certain death lay that direction anyway.

So she pressed forward, feeling an awful tension, like a bowstring being drawn farther, and farther, and even farther. She kept waiting for that crack, or for the ground to start trembling beneath her feet. Or for a spore to slip into her nose or to touch one of her eyes.

When she at last reached the shadow of the grounded enemy ship, it felt like she'd been walking for an eternity with a knife right at her throat.

Sailors gathered at the ship's rail and stared down at her. She spotted no uniforms, except maybe on that figure in the center. With the black-plumed hat, their face was lost in shadow as the sun shone from near the horizon, silhouetting them.

No one said anything. The sailors didn't offer Tress a place on their ship, but they didn't shoot her either. So, lacking any other options, Tress tied her sack of cups to her belt and tried to find a way to climb up. Unfortunately, the keel and hull of the ship were of smooth brown wood, and after a few attempts Tress knew that scaling it would be impossible.

"I'm sorry," Huck said. "I think I must have been wrong. Those don't look like the king's people up above, Tress. I wish…I wish

that I…"

Tress gave their situation a moment of thought. Then she wiped her finger to remove any spores before putting it to her mouth. She got some spittle on her fingernail, took a deep breath, and flicked it toward the spores a few feet away.

A midsized vine "tree" grew from the spores, curling around itself and reaching into the sky. Tress grabbed it, feeling the rough coils beneath her fingers, like rope.

Then she climbed.

"That's it!" Huck said, scrambling off her shoulder and up higher along the vine. "Come on, Tress. Hurry!"

She did her best, pulling herself up some ten feet until she could barely reach a porthole on the side of the ship. Huck leaped onto her shoulder again as she grabbed ahold and clung to the hull. She could see the ship's name there, painted in golden letters. The *Crow's Song*.

Up above, some of the sailors were laughing, chatting with a jovial nonchalance about her struggle. Spores streamed from her boots as she hung there, scrabbling for a foothold on a small ledge running along the outside of the ship below the portholes.

"There it is," Huck said. "Listen."

It started as a low humming that vibrated the ship. Moments later the spores began churning, air rising up through them. The ship lurched—nearly shaking Tress free. Orders above led to unfurled sails.

Tress's vine ladder slipped away, sinking into the suddenly fluid ocean. She glanced at the *Oot's Dream* as it listed to one side, dragged down by the many vines that wrapped it. The entire thing bobbed, then capsized, before finally sinking entirely.

Vines mushroomed up around the vanishing wreck as men screamed, giving their water to the ocean, and the flock of gulls scattered. Tress's current ship sailed past the wreck, but the *Oot's Dream* was gone before they arrived. Just three lonely crewmembers remained. Two on pieces of wreckage, one in a small lifeboat. All three wore scarves over their mouths, their eyes squeezed shut.

Two shots sounded from the deck, killing the two on the wreckage. For some reason, the *Crow's Song* left the man in the lifeboat alive. The sole remnant of the smuggler crew. An…ignoble end to Tress's first voyage.

She clung to the hull of the *Crow's Song*. Her fingers began to burn, her arms to ache. But there were no handholds above—plus, the side of the deck and gunwale extended out there. She doubted she had the strength or skill to get up over that, if she could even reach it.

So she hung on. Tight as she could, as the ship rocked and swayed. Faces periodically appeared above, glancing down to see if she was still there. Then they'd call out to their fellows to relay her status.

Still there.

Still there.

"Go," she whispered to Huck. "You're a rat. You can climb that."

"Doubt it," he said.

"You could try."

"That's a fact. I could."

Together they clung there. For what seemed like an eternity. Finally she started to slip. Her aching muscles screamed, and—

A rope slapped the wood next to her. She stared at it, numb, wondering if she had the strength to climb it. Instead she snatched it, hung on, and tucked her head against her arm.

Blessedly, the rope began to move, pulled up by several of the sailors above. When she was high enough, an enormous man with his black hair in dreadlocks reached down and grabbed her under her arms, then dumped her onto the deck. The last spores on her clothing died as the silver in this ship's deck killed them.

"Captain Crow said we could pull you up if you lasted fifteen minutes," another sailor said, a shorter woman. "Can't believe you did. You're a strong one."

Tress coughed, lying on the deck, her exhausted arms pulled against her. Fifteen minutes? That had been only *fifteen minutes*? It had felt like hours.

"Not strong," Tress said, hoarse. "Just stubborn."

"That's even better," the sailor said.

Huck wisely kept quiet, though he snapped his teeth at a sailor who tried to grab him.

"What are you?" Tress said to the sailors. "King's men? Privateers?"

"Neither," said another of the sailors. "We'll put up the king's colors soon, but that's a lie. It's our pretty face. Doug's sewing us a proper flag so it will be ready for next time. Black on red."

Black on red? It was pirates after all. Was that an upgrade or a downgrade from being among smugglers? And why had they sunk that other ship, never asking for loot?

A stout figure pushed through the sailors. Captain Crow—judging by the plume in her hat—had harsh lines for a face, with tan skin and a scowl deep as the ocean. Crow was…well, I've known a few people like her. She seemed too harsh. Too full of anger. She was like the first draft of a human being, before softening effects like humor and mercy had been added.

"Throw her overboard," the captain said.

"But you said we could haul her up!" said the short woman.

"That I did, and that you did. Now toss her."

No one moved to obey.

"Look at how scrawny she is," the captain snapped. "An inspector? I've known a few of those—they pick the job for its ease. She'll have never worked a day in her life, and there's no place for anyone without a use on the *Song*."

The pirates still appeared reluctant. Why would they care about her? But their hesitance was an opportunity. So Tress—dizzy with exhaustion—pulled herself across the deck and struggled to her knees. She'd spotted a bucket and brush here, and she methodically—as fast as she could make her aching arms work—took out the brush and started scrubbing the deck.

Captain Crow eyed her. The only sounds were the seething spores and the brush scraping back and forth.

At last, the captain pulled a canteen from her belt and took a long drink. It did look like a nice canteen. With leather up the outsides that had feather patterns imprinted on it. Even when exhausted, Tress appreciated a good drinking vessel.

Crow stalked off—and gave no further orders to deal with Tress. The pirates retreated to their posts, and no one tossed her.

She kept working anyway. Scrubbing as Huck whispered encouragement in her ear. She worked well into the night, until—numb with fatigue—she finally curled up in one corner of the deck and fell asleep.

PART
3

THE CABIN BOY

13

Tress awoke the next day with a face full of hair. She felt stiff, like a washrag that was long overdue for a turn in the laundry. She unfolded herself from the deck, trying to tie back her hair, and vaguely remembered being kicked during the night and told to move so she wouldn't be underfoot. She'd done it, but had been kicked awake again for the same reason on two separate occasions. There didn't appear to be any place on the deck where she *wouldn't* be underfoot.

Her next thought wasn't for food. It wasn't for something to drink, or other biological needs.

It was for Charlie.

Never had Tress felt so naive. She'd thought she could simply leave her home and rescue someone? Even though she'd never set foot on a ship before? She felt a fool. Worse, she felt pain for Charlie, who must be somewhere frightened, trapped and alone. His agony was her agony.

It might seem that the person who can feel for others is doomed in life. Isn't one person's pain enough? Why must a person like Tress feel for two, or more? Yet I've found that the people who are the happiest are the ones who learn best how to *feel*. It takes practice, you know. Effort. And those who (late in life) have been feeling for two, three, or a thousand different people…well, turns

out they've had a leg up on everyone else all along.

Empathy is an emotional loss leader. It pays for itself eventually.

That wasn't of much comfort at the time for Tress, miserable on the deck, realizing that—before she could even think of helping Charlie—she was going to have to find a way to save herself. She huddled against the gunwale, and heard someone belowdecks yelling that "first watch" could come to mess.

Huck whispered something to her and scrambled off to investigate. Tress's grumbling stomach reminded her that the last thing she'd had to eat or drink had been the water that made her see pigeons. So, aching, she climbed to her feet. "Mess" meant food on a ship, right? Maybe they wouldn't notice if she…

A lanky figure in an unbuttoned military coat stepped in front of her. Bald, with scruff on his chin, the fellow wore a sword at his side and had two pistols tucked into his belt. Laggart, the cannonmaster, was the ship's first officer. He had wiry muscles, and that long neck and bald head hinted he might have a buzzard somewhere in his family tree.

He looked Tress up and down. "First watch can eat," Laggart said. "Those are the men and women getting ready to take over sailing for the day. Are you going to be working the sails or the rigging today, honey-hair?"

"…No," Tress whispered.

"Second shift will eat next," Laggart said. "They worked all night, and can eat as soon as their replacements arrive."

"And…what watch am I?" Tress asked softly.

"Captain says you're third watch," Laggart said, then smiled as he left.

Eventually second watch was called, and the sailors exchanged places. Tress waited, groggy and stiff. And she waited. And waited. One might say she was quite the waitress that morning.

Third watch was never called. Tress suspected she was the only one "assigned" to it. So she did her best to ignore her stomach, instead observing the pirates at work. Maybe if she learned their tasks, she'd be able to anticipate how to keep out of their way.

She spent the morning so occupied, and fortunately most of them didn't seem bothered by her. They weren't a jovial crew, but they were apparently a dedicated one. A few times, Tress caught Captain Crow watching her from the side while drinking from her canteen. Her glare made Tress feel like a stubborn spot on a window.

Best to put herself to work. She rummaged in her sack, checking on her cups, then took out her hairbrush. After beating her hair into submission and locking it away in a braid, she picked up her bucket and floor brush—then realized she didn't have any more water or soap.

She stood there looking foolish before someone approached with a fresh bucket for her. She thanked him, then—with a start—realized she recognized him. It was Hoid, cabin boy of the *Whistlebow*. There was no mistaking his gangly figure and his pure white head of hair. Though everyone called him "boy," he appeared to be in his thirties and evidently of sound mind—until he opened his mouth.

"My gums sure do like a lickin'!" he said to her, then walked away with a bowlegged gait that made him wobble like a drunk penguin.

Yes, that's me.

No, I don't want to talk about it.

As I wandered off to go stuff shoelaces up my nose, Tress moved up to the quarterdeck, as it had less traffic. Here she set to work again. Turned out, Tress was quite good at scrubbing decks. It was like scrubbing windows, except you didn't need to be able to see through them at the end. In fact it was too easy, perhaps demeaning of her washing talents. Like hiring a world-class surgeon to cut the crust off your sandwich.

During her breaks, she watched the crew. She was able to pick out other faces that—like Hoid—she knew, if only vaguely. Often ships passing the Rock would unload a few crewmembers. These would get a pass from the inspector and would be hired on by another visiting vessel.

This didn't seem to be a notably rough lot—it was a mixed crew, with a variety of ethnicities and nearly as many women as men. That wasn't uncommon in the spore seas. You took whoever was willing. Sexism interfered with profits.

How had such a *normal* crew ended up as pirates? And not merely ordinary pirates, bloodthirsty ones who would sink a ship without asking for plunder?

They didn't even cover up the name of their vessel, Tress thought. *And they left one sailor alive.* Something was strange about this ship.

"I've been wanting to gargle my shirts!" I said, walking past. I pointed at her with both hands and winked. "But I ate them last

week."

Tress cocked her head, watching me wander away. As she did, Huck scampered across the deck and up onto her shoulder.

"What is wrong with that guy?" the rat asked softly.

"I'm not entirely certain," Tress whispered. "I've met him before though. He's nice. If…weird."

"People who collect stamps are weird, Tress. That man is a few eggs short of a dozen—and he doesn't realize the other ten he collected are actually rocks."

Sigh.

All right, so here's the thing. I'd had an encounter—well, more a collision—with the Sorceress a few years before. Let's just say she had something I needed, but liberating it from her proved more difficult than I'd assumed. The end result? The Sorceress gave me one of her famous curses. Look, even the most graceful dancer trips once in a while.

My curse took away my sense of taste and, well, my other four senses as well.

"What did you find out?" Tress asked the rat.

"I snatched some food," Huck said, "but could only get rat-sized portions. Sorry. Also, they really are sewing a pirate flag. I'd guess they're new to this. Maybe that's why they accidentally sank the other ship."

"No," Tress whispered, returning to her scrubbing. "They left one sailor alive on purpose, and didn't cover their ship's name. They didn't sink that ship because of inexperience…"

"…they did it to declare themselves," Huck agreed. "The pirate version of sending out a crier to announce a sale at the cobbler's shop. Moonshadows. They killed almost *thirty people*."

Tress looked up across the crew working at their posts. Earlier, she'd read intent and focus in their movements. Now she saw something else. A kind of acute desire to lose themselves in work. Perhaps to avoid having to think about what had happened the day before.

Something is very *wrong on this ship,* she thought again.

Unfortunately, before she could think more on that, other matters —of a more scatological nature—demanded her attention.

THE DOUGS

14

The Crow's Song was a much larger ship than Tress's previous one. *Oot's Dream* had been a two-masted vessel, similar to what you might call a brigantine. The *Crow's Song* was instead a full four-masted vessel, built for speed but with a spacious cargo hold and multiple decks. It was the equivalent of what you'd call a small galleon—and it had a rather large crew for Tress's world, consisting of sixty people.

I'm not going to ask you to remember them all. Mostly because *I* don't remember them all.

Therefore, for ease of both narrative and our collective sanity, I'm going to name only the more important members of the *Crow's Song*. The rest, regardless of gender, I'll call "Doug."

You'd be surprised how common the name is across worlds. Oh, some spell it "Dug" or "Duhg," but it's always around. Regardless of local linguistics, parents eventually start naming their kids Doug. I once spent ten years on a planet where the only sapient life was a group of pancakelike beings that expressed themselves through flatulence. And I kid you not—one was named Doug. Though admittedly it had a very distinctive smell attached when the word was "spoken."

"Doug" is the naming equivalent to convergent evolution. And once it arrives, it stays. A linguistic Great Filter; a wakeup call.

Once a society reaches peak Doug, it's time for it to go sit in the corner and think about what it has done.

Anyway, there was at least one woman actually named Doug on the *Crow's Song*, but I can't remember which one she was—so for the purposes of this story, they're all Dougs.

Tress approached one and asked—hesitantly—where the toilet was. The Doug pointed her toward the stairs down, explaining that the "middle deck head" was for low-ranking crew.

With Huck on her shoulder, she began to explore. The ship had four levels. The Dougs called the top one—which was exposed to the sky—the "upper deck." The "middle deck" contained places like the mess and the armory, and small rooms for officers. The "lower deck" was a cramped place where most of the sailors made their bunks.

Beneath that was the hold, a cavernous space for the copious loot the pirates would surely acquire once they figured out how to stop sinking it all to the bottom of the ocean.

There were several toilet rooms, with working plumbing, thank the moons. She peeked into an unoccupied one and saw a toilet, but no bath. How did the crew bathe? She desperately wished she could, as she kept finding dead spores in the folds of her clothing. It made her skin writhe to think how much of it must have gotten on her.

She did her business in the cramped chamber with only a tiny porthole in the wall for light. Huck politely waited outside without being prompted, proving quite gentlemanly for a rat. Feeling a little better, Tress slipped out and let him hop back onto her shoulder. What did they do with human waste, out here on the ocean? Save it all up for composting on islands? What about on long voyages? Dumping it overboard seemed dangerous, not to mention gross. Dangergross?

On her way back to the upper deck, she heard a voice coming from a room near the head. She lingered, peeking in to see a man behind a counter—the large man with dreadlocks who had hauled her onto the deck. Now, when I say "large," you might have imagined him as heavyset, or perhaps beefy. He was both, yes, but neither word did justice to Fort, the ship's quartermaster.

Fort wasn't large like, "Hey, eat a salad" or even large like, "Hey, do you play sports?" He was large like, "Hey, how did you get through the door?" It wasn't that he was fat, though he did carry a

few extra pounds. More, he looked like a person built using a different scale from the rest of humanity. One could imagine that the Shards, after creating him, had said, “Maybe we went a little far in places,” and decided to cut ten percent off all other humans to conserve resources.

Fort was holding up a ceramic cannonball that was small in his hands. His fingers on both hands were gnarled, either from some old injury or a congenital disease. The condition had to affect his dexterity.

He was with a gangly woman in a vest and trousers, her hair cut very short. Ann (the ship’s carpenter) had a nose like a dart and carried not one, not two, but *three* pistols strapped to various places on her person.

Fort handed Ann the cannonball, and although it looked light in his grip, the way she hefted it indicated otherwise. Then he picked up what appeared to be a wooden sign with a black front. Maybe two feet across and somewhat less tall.

“You examined each one in the armory?” Ann asked.

Fort glanced at the back of his wooden board and nodded.

“You didn’t find any others that were defective?” Ann asked.

Fort tapped the back of the wooden sign, and words appeared on the front. **Not a single one,** the sign said. **Each one I inspected has a proper fuse, timed to explode before it sinks a ship, so it can be captured and looted.**

Ann thumped the ball onto the counter. “Well, if none of the others are defective, we shouldn’t have to worry about sinking someone else by accident.”

Fort again tapped something on the rear of the board using his index knuckle. As he did, the words changed.

I don’t like this, Ann. We were supposed to launch cannonballs that only incapacitated the ship, not sank it. I hate that we ended up killing those people, and I really don’t like how the captain acted afterward. It doesn’t make sense.

“What are you saying?” Ann asked.

I’m saying I don’t like this at all. It’s not the kind of piracy we signed up for.

“I don’t like it either,” Ann said. “But it’s too late to change our minds. This is better than getting conscripted, at least.”

Is it though? Is it really? I didn’t want those people’s deaths on my shoulders, Ann.

Ann didn't respond. Finally, she stood up straight and walked toward the door. Tress felt a moment of panic, not wanting to be discovered eavesdropping, and scurried back into the head.

Tress listened to Ann leave up the steps outside. "What do you make of that, Huck?" she whispered.

"Don't know," he said. "Sounds like they didn't intend to sink the *Oot's Dream*, which makes sense. But after the first cannonball broke through the hull and started the ship going down, the pirates must have decided to finish the job."

Tress nodded, although she didn't know what to think about all of this.

"They're still culpable though," Huck added. "What did they think would happen, turning pirate and attacking? They can't simply decide to be sad for killing someone *after* trying to rob them. These pirates are outlaws now, Tress."

"Doesn't sound fair," she said. "The king would hang the quartermaster even if he didn't fire the cannon?"

"The law is clear. Felony murder rule, to be precise. Commit a crime and someone dies? That's murder. Even if you weren't intending it. The royal navy will be hunting this lot—and we'd best not be on board when they get caught. Just in case the officials don't believe you're a captive."

It was a wise suggestion. This ship was a death trap—either the captain would eventually tire of her, or she'd end up dead in the inevitable fighting. She had a job to do in saving Charlie, and couldn't waste time.

But how to escape? She couldn't exactly jump overboard. Plus, her dry throat warned her that she had other more immediate concerns. If the captain wouldn't let her eat, she wouldn't live long enough to escape.

She snuck over to the quartermaster's room again and glanced in to see that the large man had turned his back toward the door. He was arranging things in his many trunks and boxes behind the counter. Could she steal something to eat? Or perhaps Huck could do it for her? She glanced at him.

"What?" he asked loudly.

Tress glared at him, making a shushing motion.

"I think he's deaf," Huck said. "When I was prowling earlier, I heard someone mention that the quartermaster couldn't hear."

Indeed, Fort continued his work, still facing away from them. He

didn't notice them talking.

"I met a deaf human once," Huck said. "She was a dancer, and one of the best under the moons—best I'd seen, anyway. I was enjoying the time with her, but it ended up getting interrupted in a rather abrupt way. Which is a shame, but things happen. I also couldn't afford to talk to her, since—you know, things relating to who and what I am. Didn't want to reveal myself."

"Maybe," Tress suggested, "this would be another good time to not talk. Unless you want one of the pirates to realize they have a potentially sellable loquacious rat on board."

"Yeah, good point," he said. "It's just, I spent all those weeks hiding on the smuggler ship before they grabbed me. Got kind of lonely. It's good to have someone to chat with…"

She glanced at him.

"…which I'll stop doing now."

Tress moved to leave—but as she did so, one of the boards creaked underfoot. Fort spun immediately in her direction, then narrowed his eyes as he saw her. He might not have been able to hear, but every quartermaster I've ever known has a kind of sixth sense for when people are sneaking around near their goods.

Beneath the enormous man's glare, Tress felt like bolting. But he *had* been the one who'd pulled her up onto the deck. She stood in place instead, until he raised his strange board from the counter.

Come here, girl, it read.

It wouldn't do any good to run. So, feeling like she was entering the dragon's den, Tress entered the room.

THE QUARTERMASTER

15

Fort looked her up and down, rubbing his chin with thick fingers. Finally, he tapped the back of his board and words appeared for her.

You have a name?

"Tress, sir."

And are you truly a royal inspector?

"I…" Tress swallowed. "No. The coat doesn't belong to me. I stole it."

You're a pirate now, Fort wrote. **What you steal IS what belongs to you.**

"I'm not a pirate," she said.

You are so long as you want to keep breathing, Fort wrote. **Don't tell anyone you don't intend to join us. That sort of talk gets a person tossed overboard.**

Tress nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Don't call me sir. I left that title behind a long time ago. My name is Fort. Anyone feed you yet?

In response, her stomach growled. She shook her head.

Fort leaned below his counter, then came up with a plate, the thin ceramic edge held between the first two fingers of his hand. Earlier, she'd thought he would lack dexterity due to his fingers—which looked like they'd each been broken in several places, then

allowed to heal without splints. Yet he managed quite well. Some actions took more effort, and his hands did tremble, but he was obviously capable, even if he had to do things differently from other people.

After placing the plate before her, he pulled out a pot, scraped at the bottom, and slopped some crusty hash browns onto the plate. He followed that with some watery eggs.

Leftovers from breakfast, Tress thought. *The dregs the others didn't eat.*

She waited, with difficulty, before eating anything. He watched her, then dropped a fork onto the plate. She took this as permission and dug in.

It was awful.

The overcooked hash browns had the consistency of beetle shells—complementing the eggs, which were reminiscent of what might have been found *inside* those beetle shells. You didn't have to be a master cook to tell this food was awful, but to someone like Tress it was worse. Feeding *her* cold and crusty leftovers—the bits that hadn't gotten any spices on them—was like locking a master pianist in a room by themself, then piping in off-tune kazoo renditions of great masterpieces.

Tress didn't complain. She needed to eat, and she wasn't going to reject the only thing she'd been offered. Despite it tasting less like food and more like what food turned into.

To take her mind off the "meal," Tress nodded to the board that Fort used for communicating. "That's an odd device."

He handed her a cup of water (a nice bronze one that lacked ornamentation, but shone when it caught the light). The water at least tasted pure and clean. She drank it down eagerly.

It is, isn't it? Fort wrote. **Your words appear for me on the back as you speak. It can even differentiate voices, and puts a mark before them to indicate someone new is talking.**

"Wow," Tress said.

Now, you might be wondering why Fort didn't read lips. I, like many hearing people, once assumed this was the magical solution for people navigating the hearing world. But in case you haven't heard—pun intended—reading lips doesn't work like it does in stories. It's a messy business, full of guesswork, and is extremely taxing. Even for experts.

Fort used to rely on it anyway, enduring its low accuracy. Until

he was able to find his way to this device. It had many functions—including some he didn't know yet. For example, the words would appear larger if he wrote fewer of them, taking up all the space on the board. But when he wrote longer messages, the words shrank to fit more.

It's wonderful, Fort said. **I got it from a wizard a few years ago.**

"A wizard?" Tress said.

From beyond the stars, Fort said. **A very strange fellow. He used it to translate words to our language. I traded hard to get it. It seemed to surprise him when he realized how much it would help. It's hard for me to write the usual way for hearing people, since I can't make some of the shapes.**

That "wizard" from the stars wasn't me, by the way. I've always wondered who traded the device to Fort. That's Nalthian tech, with Awakened predictive Connection circuits.

Fort turned the board around and showed her the back, where he could tap letters and bring down lists of common words. The board anticipated his needs, giving likely options. It worked with supernatural speed, seeming to anticipate his very thoughts.

I have to leave it out in the sun once a week, or it stops working, Fort wrote. **And its magic won't respond to anyone other than me. So don't think about stealing it.**

"I wouldn't dare," Tress said with a start. "I mean…you've been so kind to me."

It isn't kindness, Fort wrote. **It's a trade.**

"For what?"

Haven't decided yet, Fort said. **Go back to your food, girl.**

She did. Unfortunately.

As she tried valiantly to keep eating, another of the sailors walked in. This was the shorter woman who had stood up to the captain the day before. Her black hair was in tight curls. She strode in and slapped something on the counter, barely giving Tress a glance.

How to describe Salay, the helmswoman? She was the same ethnicity as Fort, and like him was from the Islands of Lobu in the Sapphire Sea, where the zephyr spores release a burst of air when watered. She had delicate features, but wasn't the least bit fragile.

"All right, Fort," she said. "I'll give you three."

She'd deposited three small earrings onto the table.

I told you, Salay, Fort wrote. **I have no use for earrings. They**

make my ears itch.

"Four then," Salay said, placing another on the counter. "I won them off a Doug at cards, but it's all I have. They're solid gold. You won't get a better deal anywhere."

At the word "deal," Fort perked up visibly. He inspected the earrings.

"Come on, Fort," Salay said. "I need to get back to duty."

Fort rubbed his chin, then scratched at his dreadlocked head. Then he took something from below the counter and set it out for her: a pocket watch.

"Finally," Salay said, slipping it off the counter and hurrying out.

Fort inspected the earrings one at a time, smiling. It was true that he had no use for earrings, but…it *was* a good deal. And good deals, to Fort, were their own reward.

Tress managed to choke down the last of the food. She felt she deserved a medal for that. Fort merely gave her another cup of water, then shooed her away—but not before he wrote, **Come back after everyone else has had supper. Maybe I'll have something for you to eat.**

Tress nodded in thanks. On her way out, she passed me skipping a little as I went in to settle on a stool before Fort's counter. The quartermaster brought out some more of the "food" and gave it to me.

"My favorite!" I said.

Don't try to eat the plate this time, please, Fort wrote.

I dug into the food, humming to myself at the flavor.

What? Yes, I could taste it. Why wouldn't I be able…

Oh, the five senses? Yes, I said I lost my sense of taste to the Sorceress's curse. You thought…you thought I meant *that* sense of taste? Oh, you innocent fool.

She took my *other* sense of taste. The important one.

And with it went my sense of humor, my sense of decorum, my sense of purpose, and my sense of self. The last one stung the most, since it appears my sense of self is tied directly to my wit. I mean, it's in the name.

As a result, I present you with Hoid, the cabin boy.

Anyway, that rounds out the people you need to remember for now. Captain Crow. First officer (and cannonmaster) Laggart. Fort the quartermaster, Ann the carpenter, and Salay the helmswoman. Everyone else was a Doug, I think…

Oh, right. I nearly forgot Ulaam. But seeing as he was dead, he barely counted.

THE CORPSE

With her stomach full of "food," Tress was able to return to the top deck and resume her scrubbing with renewed vigor. She didn't know how long it had been since someone had properly washed this deck, but it was coated with a layer of dead spores that had turned black with grime. It took real work to get down to the actual wood, and so her progress was slow.

"Wow," Huck said from her shoulder, comparing the dark grimy wood ahead to the vibrant brown planks she'd cleaned, silver lines sparkling between many of them. "That really makes a difference."

"Spore scum sticks to basically anything," she said, scrubbing hard. "I've never found a better remedy than soap and effort. This wood is going to need some pitch when I'm done though."

Tress knew quite a lot about sailors for someone who knew next to nothing about sailing. She had listened to many a man or woman complain about the life, which—to hear them talk—was an existence full of drudgery. Many an off-duty sailor in the tavern had been assigned scrubbing duty before, so Tress knew that pitch on the boards would seal them and fill the gaps—plus it made them far less slippery. And you always scrubbed *across* planks, never along them, so you didn't wear grooves down the centers.

Her head was full of wisdom like that: the wisdom of complaints. It also taught her the hierarchy of a ship's crew. Most of the sailors

would be equals, save for the officers. She'd met all of those except two: the ship's surgeon and the ship's sprouter. She'd never understood that last term, not until she'd seen the man use the spores on the previous ship.

She passed midday, and ignored her stomach as it started to growl again. It should have known better, after what she'd done to it at breakfast. Fortunately, she found out where to get new water—from barrels in the hold—and she was allowed a cupful to drink each time she went to refill her bucket.

Otherwise, she scrubbed. Tragically, this work—like washing windows—was great thinking work. And her mind was, as I believe we've established, often full of thoughts.

That is one of the great mistakes people make: assuming that someone who does menial work does not like thinking. Physical labor is great for the mind, as it leaves all kinds of time to consider the world. Other work, like accounting or scribing, demands little of the body—but siphons energy from the mind.

If you wish to become a storyteller, here is a hint: sell your labor, but not your mind. Give me ten hours a day scrubbing a deck, and oh the stories I could imagine. Give me ten hours adding sums, and all you'll have me imagining at the end is a warm bed and a thought-free evening.

Tress's mind spun around what the quartermaster had said about the cannonballs. What had gone wrong? She was so intrigued that when she picked her next section to scrub, she placed herself near the forward cannon.

Moments later, a Doug called to her. "Hey, you!" he said. "New girl! Yes, you. Come on now, I need your help!"

Concerned, but too polite to object, Tress stowed her bucket and brush. She dusted off her knees, then followed after the Doug as he led her down to the hold. Here he gathered some cannonballs from a bin.

"Carry that," he said, pointing to a small keg near the wall.

Tress hesitantly picked it up, finding it lighter than she'd expected. "What's this?" she asked.

"Zephyr spores," the man said. "From the Sapphire Sea."

She nearly dropped the keg in shock. Spores? An entire keg of them? She could see why he'd demanded her help. Indeed, he eagerly chose to carry the much heavier cannonballs, leaving her the task of lugging the spores.

“Why,” she said, “do we have a small keg of spores?”

“For firing the cannons,” the Doug explained. “Can’t just drop a cannonball in! You need something to go *poof*, send the ball flying.”

Spores? They used *spores* to fire the cannons? She carried the keg more gingerly as they started up the steps.

“Normally,” the Doug said, “this would be old Weev’s job, seein’ as how it involves spores and all.”

“Weev? Is he the ship’s sprouter?”

“He *was*.” The Doug’s expression fell. “Nice fellow. Liked having him around. He was terrible at bluffing, you know, so I always beat him at cards.”

“What happened?”

“Didn’t want to become a pirate.”

“So he got off at port?”

“Oh, he got off,” the Doug said. “But there wasn’t no port…” He glanced toward Captain Crow, who stood on the quarterdeck sipping at her canteen, wind blowing the black feather in her hat.

“Captain killed him?” Tress whispered.

“He was the only one who stood up to her,” the Doug said, “when she proposed this new occupational direction. Well, Weev is occupyin’ the bottom of the ocean now. Sprouters are a crazy lot, always spendin’ more time than’s right around spores. But he didn’t deserve that. Just for askin’ questions we was all thinkin’.”

He fell silent. At least she now knew why she hadn’t met the ship’s sprouter yet. And now you know why I didn’t tell you to remember his name. Also, no, he’s not the corpse. Well, he’s *a* corpse. But he’s not *the* corpse on the ship. There’s another. Try to keep up.

The Doug led Tress to the cannonmaster’s station. Laggart wasn’t there at the moment, and the forecannon was lashed in place with its paraphernalia. The Doug began unloading cannonballs into a bin.

“All right,” he said to Tress. “I’m going to go get a few more cannonballs to refill the stock. See that big barrel there? It’s lined, like that keg you’re holding, with stuff that protects spores from our silver. We need spores alive for shooting cannonballs at other folks.

“The cannonmaster though, he needs those spores in little pouches he can stuff into the cannon easily during a fight. You’ll find empty pouches in the barrel. What you need to do is pour those spores into the pouches—without spilling any—and tie them off.

Also, you got to do your pouring *inside* the larger barrel, because of the lining that protects the spores."

The Doug shifted uncomfortably on the deck, his hands in his pockets, looking at her.

"Very well," Tress said.

"No complaints?" he asked.

She shook her head. She'd rather not do the work, as she was terrified of spores. But she also couldn't let that fear inconvenience the others. After all, she was newest on the ship. It made sense that she should do the dangerous work no one else wanted.

Tress moved over to the barrel and took off the lid. At the bottom were some filled pouches; a bunch of empty ones were in a little net attached to the outside.

"You're…really not going to complain?" the Doug asked. "I complained when they made me do it."

"You're probably smarter than I am," Tress said. "Any tips?"

"There's a funnel, some goggles, and a mask. Other than that…try not to worry. This ain't the most dangerous type of spores. You should be fine."

Many perils could fit between the sounds in "should be." But Tress was alive because the crew had resisted tossing her overboard when the captain had demanded. It seemed best to stay in their good graces. So Tress simply nodded and got to work.

THE CARPENTER

The blue spores fascinated Tress. They were the first spores from another moon, another sea, that she'd seen up close. They were beautiful, almost crystalline. The fact that they could likely kill her with ease only made them more captivating. Like an expertly forged sword crafted with love, dedication, and sweat by a smith so that someday you could do the most ugly things possible in the most beautiful of ways.

She sent Huck away with a quiet word, to not put him in danger. Then she whispered a prayer to the moons and thought of Charlie. Getting the crew to trust her was the best way to further her goal of reaching him. Doing the work they didn't want to do themselves was bound to lead her toward opportunities. Even washing windows had led her to opportunities. The most important one being when she met Charlie in the first place.

All that in mind—and with the mask over her mouth and the goggles over her eyes—she felt only *slightly* terrified as she lowered the small keg into the larger barrel. There were hooks on the side where she could affix it, and the spigot at the bottom of the keg—like for pouring beer—let the spores drain out at a careful rate. Her hand still shook as she held the funnel and filled up the first pouch with the radiant blue spores.

She tied it and set it carefully on the bottom of the barrel near

the other pouches. She fell into a rhythm, filling them, taking care not to spill a single spore. It was tense work, far worse for thinking than cleaning the deck. But Tress—being Tress—couldn't avoid thoughts entirely.

She wondered exactly what the spores did that made the cannon fire. She wondered if there were other types of spores being carried in the ship's armory—and who managed them, if the crew's sprouter was dead.

Also, she wondered why the large barrel had a false bottom.

She recognized it easily. After all, she'd spent several weeks becoming an expert on barrel contraptions and how to hide things in them. On one of the devices she'd prepared for leaving the Rock, they'd installed a secret latch hidden right about…there.

She found it near the barrel's banding. A little piece of metal she could wiggle. When she moved it, a hole—little larger than a fist—opened in the bottom of the barrel. A few pouches of spores dropped in, and her breath caught. When she reached in to pull them out, her fingers brushed something else.

A cannonball. Hidden in the cavity beneath the barrel's false bottom. There was room for three or four of them inside.

She quickly pulled the pouches out and reset the device. As she returned to her work, her hands trembled even *more*. Her mind raced so fast, it would soon need a new set of tires.

She could see it. She knew what had happened.

The cannonmaster was in charge of loading, aiming, and firing the weapon. He'd be given a rack of cannonballs, but who would be watching to see if he grabbed one from this secret compartment instead? Probably no one.

She bet those hidden cannonballs wouldn't pass Fort's inspection—they wouldn't be rigged to incapacitate the target with vines. Laggart, the cannonmaster, had *deliberately* sunk that other ship.

But why? The entire situation didn't make sense for a multitude of reasons. It wasn't just the lack of plunder. Why bother *hiding* the fact that they were going to sink the ship? Why the subterfuge?

It only made sense if…

"So, zephyr spore duty," a voice said behind Tress. "I wondered who the Dougs would force to do it, now that Weev is dead."

Tress turned to see the lanky, sharp-nosed woman with the short hair who had been talking to Fort earlier. Ann, the ship's carpenter.

Every ship needs a good carpenter. Oh, a sprouter can patch up a

hull with a quick burst of spores—but silver erodes even fully hardened roseite over time. Doesn't take a man long at sea to start contemplating how thin the barrier is between him and certain death. Just a plank. If you ever want to have a good face-to-face with your mortality, you'll find the opportunity on the deck of a ship at night, staring at the endless darkness beyond you—when you realize the darkness beneath is somehow even more heavy, more vast, and more terrifying.

That's when you realize that having a good carpenter on board is worth paying them a double share of wages. In fact, it's quite the steal.

"I don't mind the duty," Tress said, making another pouch. "I'd do it again if they asked." Inwardly, she was uneasy with how Ann walked next to the cannon, trailing her fingers on the metal. She'd been talking to Fort about the cannonballs. What side was she on? How many sides were there? What had Tress gotten herself *into*?

Sadly, she didn't know the half of it yet.

"Don't say things like that, Tress," Ann said. "Sailors don't *volunteer* for duty. It's downright untraditional."

"You know my name?" Tress said.

"Things get around on a ship," Ann replied. "I'm Ann. Ship's carpenter. Assistant cannonmaster."

Assistant to Laggart? Tress licked her lips, nervous—then stopped. Licking anything was *not* a good idea when handling spores. She made another pouch.

Had Ann seen her find the hidden chamber?

"What do you think?" Ann said, settling on a box nearby, a hand on one of her pistols as if taking comfort in it. "You're a pirate now, Tress. An unexpected sideways turn in life."

"Better than an unexpected turn downward," Tress said.

"Aye," Ann said. "That it is."

Tress wanted to ask more questions, but it felt like too much of an imposition. These people had spared her. Who was she to be making demands of them? So instead she said, "You all seem to be adjusting well to being pirates."

"Adjusting well? What kinda talk is that?" Ann leaned forward. "You want to know why, don't you? How we ended up this way?"

"I…yes, Miss Ann. I do."

"Why not ask?"

"I didn't want to be impolite."

"Impolite? To *pirates*?"

Tress blushed.

"I don't mind talkin' about it," Ann said, staring out over the sea. Before them the ship's prow cut a path through the spores. "The cap'n spun it well. We could either end up fighting in the king's coming war, or we could strike out on our own, throwing away all the laws about writs and tariffs. Plus, the cap'n said we'd be doing a noble and important duty."

"…Important?" Tress asked.

"A vital part of the economy."

"…Um, I see."

"Do you?"

"Actually, no," Tress admitted.

"Then why not say so, girl?" Ann said, shaking her head. "Anyway, our job is important. You know how rich folk are—they make all this money off people sailing around, selling and buying for them. Then what're they gonna do with the money? Lock it away. What good is *locked away* money? Ain't nobody going to enjoy it if it's trapped in a vault with Granna's wedding ring.

"So we've gotta take some. Inject it back into the economy, as a stimulus. To help local merchants, the small folk who are just tryin' to live. We do an important service."

"By…stealing."

"Damn right." Ann sat back, shifting her hand on her pistol. "Least, that's what it was supposed to be like. We weren't supposed to be deadrunners. I guess we all knew the risk. Didn't expect to fail so hard on our first act of piracy though."

Tress cocked her head, barely resisting the urge to scratch at the place where the goggles met her face. Despite the silver on the deck, spores on her fingers could live long enough to do damage.

"I'm…confused," Tress said. "Deadrunner?"

"You don't know?" Ann said. "What kind of sailor are you?"

"The kind that…doesn't know what a deadrunner is?" She felt profoundly annoyed at being berated for withholding questions, then being mocked when she didn't.

"There are two varieties of pirates, Tress," Ann explained. "There's the ordinary kind, then there's the deadrunners. Regular pirates rob, but don't kill unless they're fired upon. You sail well enough to catch the ship you're chasing, and they surrender their ransom price. Then *they* sail away with their lives, while *you* sail

away richer.

"That's how it's supposed to work. It becomes a contest, see? A race, with a little extortion to keep it interestin'. The king's marshals, they keep records. So long as you let folks go, so long as you don't murder crews…well, if you get caught, they lock you up. But they don't hang you."

"That sounds remarkably civilized," Tress said.

Ann shrugged. "Civilization exists because everyone wants to keep their innards in'r innards. You don't punch a fellow when you first meet him, 'cuz you don't wanna get punched each time *you* meet someone. The king knows this. So long as he gives pirates a *reason* not to go all the way, they'll hedge.

"Besides, who *wouldn't* rather have a chase than a battle? The poor sods on merchant ships don't want to lose their lives over their master's money. The masters don't want their ships being scuttled or stolen. And you don't last long as a pirate if'n you've gotta wipe the deck with your blood every haul. Except, you know, if you kill someone by accident."

"Or an entire ship's worth of people," Tress said.

Ann nodded. "Then you become a deadrunner. No mercy for you if caught. Even other pirates will hate you. Nobody will take crew from a deadrunner ship. You're left to make your way, lonely as the single bean in a poor man's soup."

By the moons, it made sense. Tress revised her opinion of Ann. That forlorn expression, that regret…it meant whatever conspiracy there had been to sink the smuggler ship, Ann hadn't been part of it.

Laggart *had* been though. And likely the captain. They'd *wanted* to become deadrunners. Hence the hidden cannonballs, the sinking of the *Oot's Dream*. Why else would the captain leave one of the sailors alive to spread the word?

Tress was so absorbed by these thoughts that she forgot herself and absently scratched at the itch by her goggles. She froze as she was doing it. *Moonshadows.*

Well, at least—

That was when Tress's face exploded.

THE OTHER CORPSE

Tress found herself lying on the deck, the goggles blown free of her face. What was that sound? Screams of pain?

No. Laughter.

Ann was laughing uproariously. Tress immediately put her hand up to her cheek. It was sore, but fortuitously still attached to her face. She'd gotten a mote or two of zephyr spores under the rim of her goggles, where they had touched a bead of sweat. Mercifully, that tiny amount of spores didn't pack enough of a punch to kill her.

"It isn't funny," Tress said, sitting up.

(She was right. It was *hilarious*.)

"Come on, spore girl," Ann said, helping Tress up by the arm. "Let's have the surgeon look you over." She shouted toward the Doug who had made Tress do this work, and told him to clean up. Then Ann helped the disoriented Tress down to the middle deck.

"You really work with that stuff?" Tress asked Ann. "As assistant cannonmaster?"

"Well, when they let me," Ann said.

"Why don't the cannons explode?"

"They do. That's what makes the cannonballs shoot out."

Tress determined to give that some thought later, as it didn't make sense yet. Washing windows, it should be noted, is not an

occupation that offers a thorough education in ballistics.

Over from the mess, near the prow, was a door that had been closed when Tress had investigated earlier. Now Ann pushed it open and steered Tress inside. There she found a man dressed in a sharp suit of a cut she'd never before seen. It was somehow less ostentatious but more elegant than the uniforms the duke and Charlie had worn. Pure black, with pressed lines and no buttons on the front.

He had jet-black hair, and features that looked too sharp to be real. Like he was a painting, or a drawing. His skin was an ashen grey, his eyes bloodred. If the underworld had legal counsel, it would have been this man.

Tress should have been frightened of him, but instead she was awed. What was a creature like this doing on a pirate ship? Surely this was a divine being from beyond space, time, and reality.

In a way, Tress was correct.

And no, he still hasn't given me my suit back.

"My!" Dr. Ulaam said with a refined but excitable voice. "What have you brought me, Ann? Fresh meat?"

"She was loading the zephyr pouches," Ann explained, leading Tress to a seat at the side of the small chamber, "and some got underneath her goggles."

"Poor child," Ulaam said. "New to the ship, hmmmm? You have very nice eyes."

"If he asks to buy them," Ann whispered, "haggle. You can usually get double his first offer."

"My eyes?" Tress said, her voice rising. "He wants to take *my eyes*?"

"After you are dead, naturally," Ulaam said. This room was filled with cabinets and drawers. He unlatched one and took out a small jar of salve, then turned toward her. "Unless you'd rather do it now? I have several fine replacements I could offer. No? What about just one?"

"What…what *are* you?" Tress asked.

"He's our zombie," Ann said.

"Such a crude term," Ulaam replied. "And not terribly accurate, as I've told you."

"You ain't got a heartbeat," Ann said. "And your skin is cold as a wet fish."

"Both adaptations reduce my required caloric intake," Ulaam

said. “My method is efficient. I think everyone will be going around without a heart, once I solve the problem of how lacking one kills humans.” He offered Tress the salve. “Put this on your skin, child, and it will help with the pain.”

Tress accepted it, and timidly put a dab on her finger.

“She took it easily,” Ulaam said. “Is she brave or stupid?”

“We haven’t figured out yet,” Ann said.

“I…gather this must be some kind of hazing,” Tress said, “from the way Ann keeps grinning. So I might as well get it over with. If any of you wanted me dead, I’m as good as tossed overboard anyway.”

“Ooo,” Ulaam said. “I like her. I’m going to have to keep an eye on you, girl. Here, hold this.”

He dropped something into her other hand.

It was a human eye.

She squealed and dropped it, though Ulaam caught it with a quick snatch. “Be careful! It’s one of my favorites. Observe the deep blue coloring. It would look wonderful exchanged for your left eye —you’d be heterochromatic blue and green. Quite striking.”

“I… No thank you?”

“Ah well,” Ulaam said, putting the eye away. “Perhaps another time. Use the salve; there is no prank involved. I’m probably the least dangerous thing on this ship.”

“You literally eat *people*, Ulaam,” Ann said.

“Dead ones. My! How dangerous! Like the mighty worm of the earth or the bacteria of decomposition. They are my colleagues.”

Hesitant, Tress touched the salve to her cheek. The pain vanished immediately. Startled by the efficacy, she rubbed it around her cheek. When Ulaam held up a hand mirror, her skin wasn’t even red, and there was no sign of a wound.

“There’s a reason we keep ’im around,” Ann said. “Even if he’s weird as a two-headed snake.”

“As the only true source of modern medicine in this backwater land,” he said, “I find your vivid simile inaccurate; incomplete axial bifurcation is far more likely in reptiles than other animals, so if you *wish* to call me odd, pick a two-headed bird or a mammal for full effect.”

Both women stared at him, trying to parse that sentence.

“I’ve eaten several two-headed snakes,” Ulaam noted. “And mimicked their forms. So rather than being as *odd* as one, I’ve

literally *been* one. Alas, I couldn't divide my consciousness and think twice as quickly. Wouldn't that have been fun?" He took the salve back from Tress. "Anyway, try to avoid blowing yourself up in the future, hmmmm? It mangles the corpse and gives it a metallic taste."

If you're wondering, I have it on good authority that Ulaam was *enjoying* himself during my regrettable period of indisposition. He made no move to break my curse, and instead wrote some extremely embarrassing accounts of my actions and sent them to several good friends of ours.

Granted, the rules of the curse prevented me from giving any direct explanations of how to break it. But I really expected more from him. As it stands, after coming to find me and then discovering my…ailment, he'd just taken up residence on the ship. He'd always fancied becoming an explorer. "For the sense of adventure, hmmmm?" he'd said.

The crew hadn't known what to make of him at first. Captain Crow shot him a few times, an experience he reports as being "invigorating." Members of his species are virtually impossible to kill. Other than the eating corpses part, they can be handy to have around—as the crew soon discovered.

From then on, they simply dealt with him. Rather like a rash that occasionally rescues one from life-threatening wounds. He didn't ask for payment aside from the occasional otherwise-useless corpse. It's gruesome, yes, but you'll find you're able to put up with quite a bit of eccentricity in a person who can literally work miracles on your behalf.

Tress—understandably left numb by her first interaction with the ship's surgeon—was deposited on the deck near her bucket and brush. Ann went off to do some other work, so Tress—prodding at her completely healed cheek—decided to go back to scrubbing.

She hadn't made much progress before Huck came scampering up. "Something's happening."

"What?" Tress asked. "An attack?"

"No, no. See, you sent me away, so I figured I'd go sneak some food. I'd already eaten, but you never can have too much, right? I was down in the hold where—I'll have you know—there's nothing really accessible without nibbling through sacks. And people *hate* when we nibble through sacks. If they hate it so much, why not leave them untied for us? Then no sacks are harmed, you see, and

—”

“What did you want to tell me, Huck?” Tress asked. “What’s happening?”

“Right, I was getting to that. Laggart was down there looking through the storage. And Tress, he fetched a couple of cannonballs. I saw him sneak them into his pack.”

Interesting. It was time to test her theory.

She positioned herself to scrub near the forward cannon station. Not too close, but close enough to watch. Then she became a waitress again for a short while, watching for Laggart.

It didn’t take long.

THE CANNONMASTER

Laggart swooped over to the cannon and craned his long neck over the barrel, eyeing the bundles of spores. He eventually declared the work well done, praising the Dougs.

At that moment they discovered the wonders of outsourcing: the luxury of taking all the credit, doing none of the work, yet reserving someone to blame just in case. Tress didn't mind. She'd rather not have Laggart paying attention to her.

The Dougs hopped off to other duties, and Laggart made quite the show of cleaning the cannon himself—something he never left to another's care.

Tress scrubbed the deck nearby, invisible in plain sight. Whenever Laggart turned her way, her head was inconspicuously down in her work. Yet she watched closely, and spotted it as he stealthily took a fist-size cannonball from his pack and hid it in the false bottom of the barrel.

She had been right. He kept rigged cannonballs in the hidden compartment. Cannonballs designed to sink ships. But why? It was so much more dangerous to be deadrunners, and it denied them loot. Wasn't that the one essential thing that defined pirates? Other than, you know, the boats and stuff?

He *wanted* the crew to become deadrunners. Against their wishes or knowledge.

Laggart finished his work, shouted at a few nearby Dougs for being lazy, then hauled his pack to his shoulder. He strutted off toward the captain's cabin, where Crow let him in—and posted a sailor at the door before closing it. The heavyset Doug didn't look much like a guard, but the way he lingered reminded Tress of how Brick's cousin stood watch by the tavern door on nights when people were expected to get rowdy.

"I need to know what they're talking about in there," Tress said.

"Yeah, that would be great, wouldn't it?" Huck said from her shoulder. "I'll bet it's very secretive."

"I need someone to slip in," Tress said.

"Maybe we could ask one of the Dougs?" Huck said.

"Someone," Tress said, "who is *small*, *quick*, and who *won't be noticed* listening."

"Dang," Huck said. "Don't know if the Dougs will be sneaky enough. Have you *heard* the way they tromp around on the deck? I was trying to sleep last night, and I'd swear they have lead in their shoes. It…" He trailed off, noticing her glaring at him. "Oooooohhhhh. Rat. Right, right. Got it."

He hopped off her shoulder and scuttled over to the gunwale, then scrambled along it in the shadows over to the captain's cabin. The Doug watching didn't notice as Huck slipped along a small ledge on the outside of the ship and went in the captain's window.

Perhaps you're wondering why Huck had so quickly fallen in with Tress. Well, there are a lot of things I could tell you here—but suffice it to say that in the short life of Huck the rat, every human he'd met had tried to kill, capture, or sell him. Every human but Tress. He didn't know a lot about people, having spent most of his life isolated—but he did like Tress. He would rather she not die. So, spying it was.

Tress began scrubbing furiously to work out her anxiety. Minutes passed with the weight of hours, as she worried about sending Huck into danger to satisfy her curiosity. That wasn't something she would normally have done. Life as a pirate was already affecting her.

Yet Charlie was out there somewhere, afraid, hurting. She had to find a way to escape, then continue her quest. So maybe learning to impose on people a little was all right.

"Hey," Huck said, scampering across the railing next to her, "you got anything to eat? Spying is hungry work."

Tress glared at him as her stomach growled.

"Just asking," Huck said. "Moons, girl, no need to look at me like I ate the center of the loaf and left you the heels."

"Did you hear anything?" she asked.

Huck twitched his nose in a way he seemed to think she would understand, then he hopped down and scurried over to a more sheltered section of the deck. She followed, her back to the Dougs. To anyone watching, she'd simply be doing her thing, scrubbing away. They wouldn't be able to see Huck.

"All right," the rat said from the deck in front of her. "I'll tell you what they said. Let me get into character."

"…Character?" Tress said.

Huck went up on his hind legs, holding his little ratty paws before himself with his nose up in the air. "I am Captain Crow," he said in a surprisingly good approximation of her aristocratic accent. "Hip, hop, do as I say. My, this canteen water is tasty. Laggart, what news of the cannon? Is everything ready?"

Tress waited, her head cocked.

"You be Laggart," Huck hissed.

"I wasn't there! I don't know what he said."

"You'll do fine." Huck waved his paw at her. "Go ahead. Be Laggart."

"Uh…the cannons are…ready?"

"Voice needs more crust to it," Huck whispered. "And stretch out your neck like his. It will help you get in character."

"But—"

"Excellent, Laggart," Huck said in his captain voice. "But I have unfortunate news via a raven from my contact in Kingsport. The remnants of the ship we sank have been found, but there were no survivors, just a single corpse. That man we left alive appears to have rejected my bountiful generosity and done me the insult of dying from wounds we didn't realize he had."

"She said that?" Tress whispered. "Those exact words?"

"It's a dramatic recreation," Huck hissed. "What, you think I wrote it down? With these?" He waved his paws at her. "That's as close as I can remember. Now do Laggart's part."

"Um…that's sad?" Tress said.

"Tress, that's not what he said. He said, 'All that work for *nothing*? We'll have to sink another then!'" He waved a paw for her to continue.

Tress sighed. “All that work for nothing. We’ll have to sink another then.”

“Moonshadows, could you put *less* emotion into it?” Huck said. “I feel like you’re not taking your role seriously.”

“I don’t—”

“This is a problem, Laggart,” Huck said in his captain voice, falling to all fours and stalking back and forth with his nose in the air. “The crew is upset. I’m worried about some of them running off.”

“But *why*?” Tress said.

“We’re getting there,” Huck said. “Look, why don’t I just do Laggart’s part too? You take a break. Memorize your lines next time, all right?”

“But—”

Huck stretched out his neck and spoke with a creepy, scratchy voice. “As well you should, Captain,” he said. “Fort is brewing trouble, and maybe Salay too. We need blood binding them to this ship if we’re going to do what you want.”

Huck moved over to be the captain again, standing up on his hind legs with his front paws on the gunwale, as if mimicking the captain gazing out the window. “The crew will never follow us to dangerous seas unless they have no other choice. Unless they’re desperate. We will sink another ship, Laggart, and leave *a couple* sailors alive this time.”

Huck turned to her and settled into a more ratlike posture. “And that’s it.”

“Dangerous seas,” Tress whispered. The Verdant Sea was one of the *safer* ones, but apparently Captain Crow wanted to leave such spores and head toward a place the crew wouldn’t go unless they had no other choice.

“So, what do you think?” Huck asked. “She’s got some kind of special curse for the crew, eh? Blood binding them to the ship?”

“No curse,” Tress whispered, continuing to scrub so she wouldn’t appear suspicious.

“But Laggart said—”

“It was a metaphor, Huck,” Tress said. “Don’t you see? The captain isn’t certain of her crew’s loyalty. She wants to sail dangerous seas, but is worried they’ll desert her if she tries to make them do that. So…”

“So she turns them to piracy, then ‘accidentally’ sinks a few

ships," Huck said. "Making them into deadrunners. Chased by the law, ostracized by other pirates, they'll have no choice but to follow her orders." Huck twitched his nose, which seemed to be his version of nodding in agreement. "I can see that. Yeah, you're probably right. You…look morose though."

"Not morose," Tress said. "Merely distracted."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, "I've just figured out a way for us to escape this ship."

THE HELMSWOMAN

Captain Crow soon emerged from her cabin, leaving Laggart to strut across to the bow while she climbed up to the quarterdeck. Tress went down to refill her bucket and left Huck to forage for some more food. Returning to the upper deck gave her an excuse to reset her location, so she moved to the quarterdeck, near where the captain stood next to Salay—the helmswoman who had traded Fort those earrings earlier.

Tress didn't want to act suspicious, so she didn't execute her plan at first. She scrubbed, feeling the boat rock upon the spores. Listening to the Dougs calling to each other and the planks creaking. There's a certain *freedom* to the sounds of a ship at sea. The feeling of motion, of going somewhere. On an ocean—even a spore ocean, so long as the seethe holds up—it's hard to sit still. You're either bending the waves and wind to your will, or you're being bent to theirs. Usually it's a careful grapple between the two.

As Tress stood up to stretch, she gazed across the vibrant green sea. It was odd because the moon was in the wrong place—always before it had been almost overhead, but they'd sailed far enough that it was several degrees lower.

She couldn't help but remark upon the sea's beauty. Spores, vibrant in the sunlight, shimmered as they seethed. An endless expanse of lush death, waiting to explode with life. Like with the

zephyr spores earlier, this beauty transfixed her. Our minds want dangerous things to be ugly, yet Tress found those rolling waves *inviting*. In the moment, she imagined those rippling spores upon her skin, but rather than cringing, she was curious.

Danger doesn't make a thing less beautiful—in fact, there's a magnifying influence. Like how a candle seems brightest on the darkest night. Deadly beauty is the starkest variety. And you will never find a murderess more intoxicating, more entrancing, than the sea.

"North," the captain said, holding up a compass. "North, Salay. Toward the Seven Straits."

"Into the shipping lanes?" Salay asked.

"Best place to find our next target," the captain said, tucking away her compass.

Tress sensed her opportunity. She settled down, scrubbing hard, then muttered, "You'll kill more, will you?"

She heard the captain shift behind her. Tress kept her head lowered. After a moment though, she muttered, "They were good people you killed. Poor Kaplan. And Marple. And Mallory. Fed to the spores."

The deck creaked as Captain Crow stepped over. This was a dangerous ploy, but…well, Tress was surrounded by pirates sailing the spore sea. She hadn't grown up knowing danger, but they were quickly becoming acquainted.

"You muttering something, girl?" Crow asked. "Ungrateful, maybe, for the kindness this here crew showed you?"

Tress froze as if frightened, and dropped her brush as she looked up. "Captain! I didn't know you… I mean…"

"Are you *ungrateful*?" Crow asked.

"I appreciate my life," Tress whispered, her eyes down.

"But?"

"But that ship carried my family, Captain. I loved them."

"You're a royal inspector. Why were you traveling with your family?"

"That?" Tress scoffed. "An inspector left this coat at a tavern we stopped by, and I started wearing it because it made my family laugh. And now…now they're all dead…"

She let it linger. Then she glanced up and saw thoughtfulness on the captain's expression. Understanding.

No, you didn't kill everyone *on the* Oot's Dream*,* Tress thought.

You left one alive. And if she were to escape, then tell everyone how the Crow's Song *killed her family…*

The captain turned toward Salay and unscrewed her canteen. According to what Tress had overheard from the crew, it was common water, which explained why the woman wasn't drunk all the time.

"Changed my mind, Helmswoman," Crow said, then took a drink. "Take us east, toward Shimmerbay. We should restock on water."

"If you say so, Captain," Salay said. "I thought we had enough though."

"Never can have enough water," the captain said. "Can't let my canteen go dry, can we? Besides, we've got rats on board. Need to pick up a ship's cat."

Quick as that, Salay called orders to the crew in the rigging and spun the ship's wheel, and they turned toward freedom. Tress felt a surge of excitement.

Now, most people would agree that humans are not telepathic. We can't directly send our thoughts or emotions into the minds of others. Nevertheless, you can hear my story and imagine the things I describe—the same as I picture them in my own mind. What is that, if not a form of telepathy?

Beyond that, there are those among us who have the uncanny ability to read another's emotions. Not through magic, or mystical Connection, or any such figgldygrak. No, they are simply students of human nature. They can pick up on people's moods through subtle cues of body language—in the way their eyes move, the way their muscles twitch.

Some of these are doctors interested in healing the mind. Others find their way to the clergy, in search of ways to help the human soul. Then there are the ones like Captain Crow, for whom their ability to read others provides a…different kind of advantage.

That moment on the deck, a part of Crow's mind picked up that Tress was excited. That Tress was *happy* the ship had turned toward Shimmerbay. Crow wasn't conscious of what she knew, or how she knew it, but—like one might feel an oncoming bout of indigestion—she knew that she wasn't pleased and that Tress was the reason. If you want to ruin Captain Crow's day, point out that she made someone happy. If you want to ruin her entire week, point out that she did it by *accident*.

Crow didn't reconsider her decision to sail for the port. She

wasn't the type to second-guess herself. Instead Crow just pulled her foot back and planted a solid be-booted *kick* right in Tress's stomach.

The unexpected blow left Tress groaning, tears leaking from her eyes as she curled up in a puddle of soapy water. Crow sauntered off, whistling casually and screwing closed the top on her canteen. She was, it might be noted, a perfect example of why the word *jerk* needs so many off-color synonyms. One could exhaust all available options, invent a few apt new ones, and still not be able to completely describe her. Truly an inspiration to the vulgar poet.

Salay now, she was another story. People considered the short helmswoman stern, but she'd been on the business end of a few unearned kicks herself. After barely a moment of thought, she locked the ship's wheel in place—something she wasn't supposed to do save for emergencies—and stepped over to check on Tress.

"Hey," Salay said softly, rolling Tress to her side. "Let me feel at it. If you've cracked a rib, we'll want to take you to visit the ship's surgeon."

"No!" Tress said. "He wants to cut pieces of me off!"

"Nonsense. Ulaam wouldn't hurt a dove."

"…He wouldn't?"

"Nope. They don't have hands he can embalm." She winked at Tress, who—after a moment—managed a grin despite the pain.

Salay prodded at Tress's lower ribs and listened to Tress explain what hurt and what didn't. That persuaded both that the kick hadn't broken anything other than Tress's mood, so Salay returned to her post and unlocked the wheel.

She continued to watch Tress sitting in a morose lump on the deck. Eventually Salay called, "You ever worked a ship's wheel before?"

Tress hesitantly stood and looked over at her, questioningly. Salay stepped back and gestured to the wheel.

Now, I know that on your planet, steering a ship isn't that big a deal. In many places, they'll hand the ship's wheel to any kid with a standard number of fingers and a habit of leaving at least one out of their nose for extended stretches of time. But on the spore seas they treat it differently. Guiding the ship is a privilege, and the helmsperson is an officer tasked with a serious duty.

So even if Tress had often been on ships—as she'd been pretending—it was likely she wouldn't ever have taken the wheel.

Awed, she stepped over, double-checking with Salay before fixing her hands on the wheel in the positions the helmswoman indicated.

"Good," Salay said. "Now, hold it firm. You feel those vibrations? That's the seethe shaking the rudder. You need to be careful to not let that shake the entire ship. Hold the wheel firm, and take any movements slowly and smoothly."

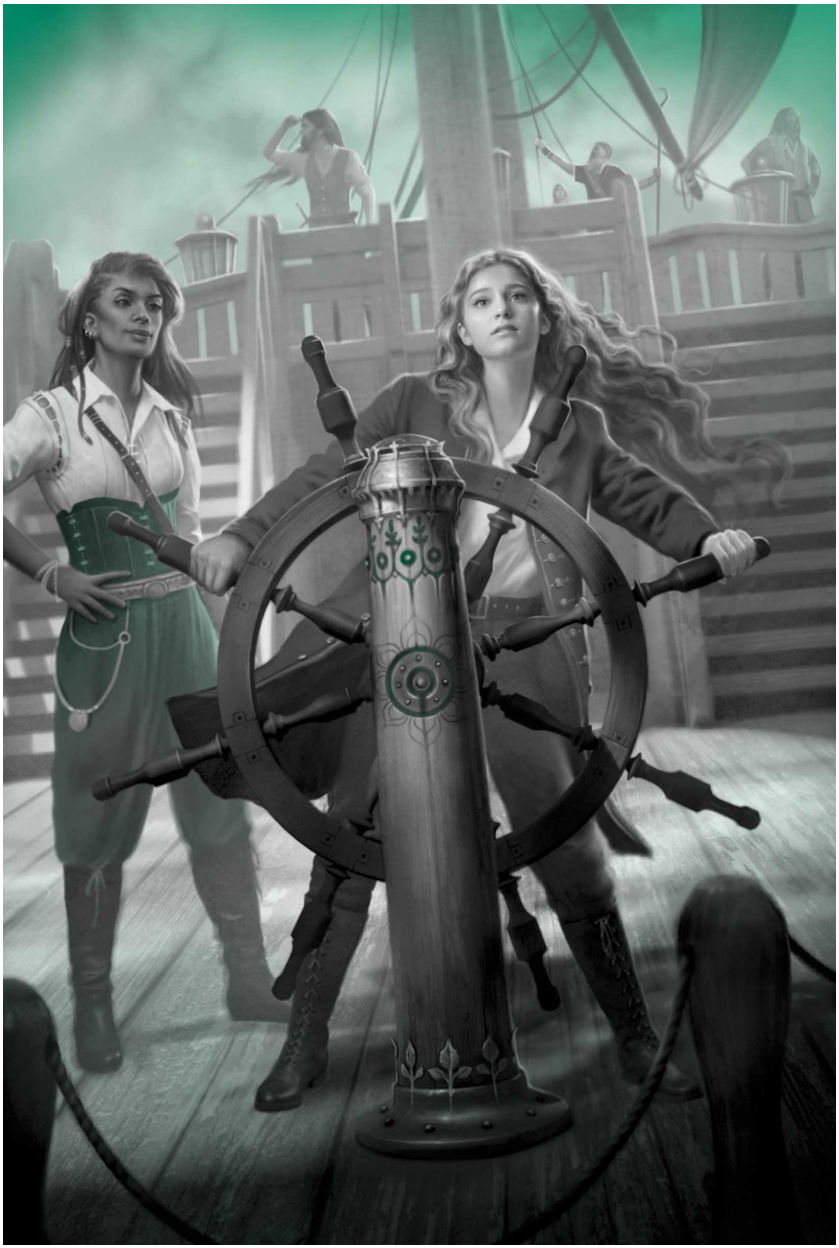
"And if the seethe stops?" Tress asked.

"Turn the wheel to straighten out the rudder, so the spores don't rip it free. But again, you need to be *careful*. A sudden motion from the helmswoman can send sailors tumbling from the rigging."

Tress nodded, wondering if maybe it wasn't the best idea to entrust such an important duty to *her*. Salay, however, was a little like Captain Crow—in that she was the opposite of the captain in the way that only someone very similar could be.

Salay also had an instinct for what people were feeling, and she'd noted Tress's dedication to her scrubbing. A woman who did such a simple duty with exactness…well, in Salay's experience that sort of thing scaled upward. Same way you would be more likely to lend your best flute to someone who treated their own battered one with respect.

Tress held firmly to the wheel, feeling the chaotic churn of the spores beneath travel up the tiller ropes, through the wood, and into her arms. She felt a deeper connection to the sea when standing there, and—if not a power over it—an ability to ride it. There was strength in being the one who steers. It was a freedom she had never before known, and had never before realized she needed. One of the great tragedies of life is knowing how many people in the world are made to soar, paint, sing, or steer—except they never get the chance to find out.



Whenever one does discover a moment of joy, beauty enters the world. Human beings, we can't create energy; we can only harness it. We can't create matter; we can only shape it. We can't even create life; we can only nurture it.

But we *can* create light. This is one of the ways. The effervescence

of purpose discovered.

Then Tress saw the captain stalking across the deck, and the pain in her stomach—including some not directly caused by the kick—returned. "Won't the captain be mad if she sees me up here?"

"She might," Salay said. "She couldn't do anything about it though. Traditions as old as the seas say the helmsperson decides who steers the ship. Not even Crow would dare imply otherwise. If I wanted, I could keep the wheel from *her*."

As if to prove her point, Salay showed Tress the ship's compass and sky chart, both kept in a cabinet next to the helm. She had Tress correct the ship's course by a few degrees, taking them to the east of a group of large rocks jutting from the ocean ahead.

"It's the helmswoman's job," Salay said, her expression distant, "to protect the ship. Keep a steady hand, steer clear of danger. Out of storms, away from spore explosions. Keep them safe somehow…"

Tress followed Salay's gaze. She was staring down at Captain Crow.

"She is pushing the crew," Tress said, cautiously choosing her words, "to go further than they want."

"We all decided this together," Salay said. "We're responsible for our actions."

"She's more reckless than the rest of you," Tress said. "She…" Tress almost explained what she'd discovered about the captain and Laggart, but thought better of it. Making such an accusation didn't seem prudent. She barely knew Salay or anyone else on this crew.

"Crow is a harsh one," Salay said. "That's true. That might be what this crew needs though. Now that we're deadrunners."

Those were Salay's words, at least. The way she glared at the captain wasn't so respectful.

"I don't understand why you've all done this," Tress said softly. "Becoming…what you have."

"It's a fair question," Salay replied. "I guess we all have our own reasons. For me, it was either this or give up sailing. Maybe I should have done that. It's just…there's something about standing on a ship, holding the wheel. Something special. Moons, I sound like a lunatic talking like that. I—"

"No," Tress said. "I understand."

Salay regarded her, then nodded. "Anyway, I have someone to find out here on these seas. Sooner or later I'll sail into a port and discover my father is there. I can pay his debts and bring him home.

Surely it's the next port…" She lifted her compass, then stared off toward the horizon.

Tress felt a sudden stab of shame, though she couldn't place the reason. Yes, she understood something in Salay's voice—that longing for someone in trouble. That determination to do something about it since no one else would. But there was no reason to feel *ashamed* of—

The wheel lurched in her hands, and the entire ship began to shake. Tress gripped tight, then—terrified she'd drop the sailors from the rigging—eased the wheel to the right, straightening the rudder. The *Crow's Song* stopped quivering, and—as Tress fought the wheel—slowly glided to a halt. The seethe had stilled.

Sweating, gasping, Tress looked to Salay. The helmswoman, ever stoic, merely nodded. "That could have been worse," she said. Then, noticing how the sudden halt had panicked Tress, she added, "Maybe go take a rest."

THE PIRATE

Laggart called for the afternoon watch to go for dinner while they waited out the stilling. Not wanting to draw the captain's ire any further, Tress returned to her work, scrubbing while everyone else relaxed.

As always, she spent the time thinking. I would call the gift of thoughtfulness a double-edged sword, but I've always found that metaphor lacking. The vast majority of swords have two edges, and I've not found them to be any more likely to cut their owner than the single-edged variety. It is the sharpness of the wielder, and not the sharpness of the sword, that foreshadows mishap.

Tress's mind *was* sharp as a sword, which in this moment was unfortunate. Because while she'd identified a path to freedom, she couldn't help listening in as Ann leaned against the mast nearby and spoke to Laggart.

"The one who loaded spores for your cannon?" Ann said, thumbing over her shoulder at Tress. "It wasn't the Dougs. It was her. Thought you should know."

Please don't stick up for me, Tress thought, feeling another stab of guilt. *Please don't remind me how nice you are.*

Night fell and the seethe began again, sending the ship back on course toward its port. Tress tried to scrub away her frustration, but guilt does not clean as easily as spore scum. And soon I came

ambling up to her.

"Your coat is nice," I whispered to her, "but it would look better if you painted half of it orange."

"Orange?" Tress said. "That…sounds like it would clash."

"Clashing is good fashion, trust me. Oh, Fort says to go see him for food." I winked. "I need to go nibble on my toes for a bit. They taste like *fate*."

Tress tried to ignore the offer, but soon Huck came bouncing up to her. "Hey. You hungry? I'm hungry. We gonna go try to get some food or what?"

With a sigh, Tress let him climb onto her shoulder, then trudged down to the quartermaster's office. There, by the light of a small lantern, Fort handed her another plate of food. It didn't taste quite so offensive as last time—but perhaps that was because so many of her taste buds had committed ritual suicide following the apocalyptic breakfast.

Tress sat on a stool in front of Fort, who insisted—via his incredible writing board—that he wasn't doing her a favor, and this was merely a trade. Tress saw through it. She saw it in the way he refilled her cup (the same bronze one she had used earlier) when it got low, and how he had saved her a bit of cake for dessert. It was awful, old and crusty like the rest, but the thought meant something.

Moons, it *hurt*. Not the food; her own betrayal. She'd known these people only a day, but she still smiled when Ulaam sauntered in and haggled for the gull bones from dinner, which Fort had saved for him. It was not the haggling itself that she smiled at, but the fond way the two sported during it. This ship was a *family*. A doomed family led by a mother who didn't care for them.

Tress had to do something.

"Fort," she said, looking down at her plate and pushing around the last bit of what she *hoped* was gull meat. "I don't think Captain Crow has the crew's best interests at heart."

Fort froze, holding a cup he'd been polishing. A nice pewter mug, with delightful nicks along the rim from repeated use. Tress didn't know if it was from the seventh-century Horgswallow tradition or simply a close copy, but it was an excellent specimen.

"I…I listened in on her," Tress said. "When she and Laggart—"

That's enough, Fort wrote. **Anything more will get you tossed overboard, Tress. No speaking mutiny.**

“But Fort,” she said, lowering her voice, “you were worried about the cannonballs, and I discovered—”

He slapped the counter to cut her off. Then he very deliberately wrote in large letters, **NO MORE.**

Moonshadows…he looked terrified, broken fingers trembling as he tapped on his board.

Captain visited, asked why I was being so nosy. Shouldn’t have said anything. Don’t you say anything. It’s too dangerous. SHE’S too dangerous.

He erased those words quickly, glancing toward the door, sweating as he shook the board and made certain nothing incriminating remained.

Finish your food, Fort wrote.

“Why are you all so scared of her?” Tress said. “She’s just one person.”

Fort’s eyes widened. **You don’t know,** he wrote. **Of course you don’t. And I won’t say; not my place. But she could kill every one of us, Tress. Easy as that. So keep your tongue and LET IT DROP.** He punctuated that by putting the board down and turning away from her.

So much for warning the crew about the captain’s plans. She forced herself to eat her last bite of the meal, then slipped out of the quartermaster’s office. She lethargically walked back onto the upper deck, her belly full, her feet feeling like they were chained.

“Moons,” Huck whispered from her shoulder. “We need to get away from here before the place turns nasty. How are we going to escape? You never told me.”

In response, Tress raised a finger and pointed. The Verdant Moon dumped spores far in the distance, but was close enough to illuminate the deck with a green glow. Ahead of the ship, lights dappled a large shadow. Land, and the port city of Shimmerbay. Freedom.

“I could sneak away no problem,” Huck said. “But they’ll be watching you. Captain will set guards, Tress. They won’t let you go.”

“Ah, but they will,” she said, sick.

The captain ordered the crew to quarters for the night, saying they were making a quick stop and anyone who tried to sneak off would be flogged. Then she set Laggart on watch. But Tress slept on the deck as she had the night before—and with no sailing to be

done, there was no one to trip over her.

Around midnight, Laggart wandered off to use the privy. He made certain to clomp loudly on the steps, to wake Tress—who wasn't asleep, though she appreciated the gesture. She stood up, quietly gathered up her sack of cups, then crossed the empty deck.

"Huh," Huck said. "If they didn't want anyone getting off…why did they run a gangplank down to the dock?"

"Because," Tress whispered, standing there, "Crow wants me to spread the story of the *Oot's Dream* sinking. Remember, the captain *wants* this crew to be deadrunners. If I am allowed to slip away, she presumes I'll tell everyone.

"Then the crew will be trapped beneath the captain's will. They're too afraid of her to mutiny, and as long as they're too frightened of the law to escape, they'll have to do what she says. Sail dangerous spores, essentially as her slaves."

"Poor lunatics," Huck said. "Well, let's get away before we end up like them."

Tress hesitated at the top of the gangplank. Shimmerbay was a good distance from Kingsport, but she could make her way there. Continue her plan of figuring out what the Sorceress wanted for Charlie, then find a way to free him.

"Tress," Huck said, "I can't help noticing that you aren't *moving*."

"I should stay," she whispered. "And help the crew."

"What?" Huck exclaimed. "No, you shouldn't."

"They've been so kind to me."

"You barely even met them! You don't owe them anything."

"I saved you when I'd barely met you," Tress said. "I didn't owe you anything."

"Well, I mean…" The rat rubbed his paws. "Yeah, but…well… Huh."

She didn't know if she could rescue Charlie. She wanted to so badly, but his pain—though poignant to her—wasn't something she could immediately prevent.

The people of this crew were different.

"Maybe if I can help the crew," Tress said, "they'll take me to the Midnight Sea to get Charlie."

"They're pirates."

"They're a family," Tress said. A plan started to form. A way she could stop Crow in secret. "And I…Huck, I need to do what I can. For them."

Decision made, a weight came off her. She wasn't abandoning Charlie. But this *was* something she needed to do.

"Oh boy," Huck said as Tress turned around and walked back to her sleeping spot.

"You should run," Tress said to him. "Get away. I won't blame you, Huck. It's the smart thing to do."

He clicked his teeth together, and she thought maybe that was a ratty version of a shrug. "I have a good feeling about you," he said. "But, I mean, are you *sure* about this?"

Of course I'm not, Tress thought. *I haven't been sure of anything since I left the Rock.*

Something flared in the night. A match. Tress felt a spike of alarm as she saw the light illuminate a figure sitting on the steps up to the quarterdeck. Captain Crow, her face outlined in orange as she lit her pipe.

Had she seen? Had she *heard* Tress talking to Huck? The captain puffed on her pipe and waved out the match, plunging her face into darkness—backlit by the bright, moon-filled sky.

"Captain?" Tress asked.

"You should run, girl," Crow said. "You've proven yourself these last two days, and I judge you worthy of life. So go ahead. Slip away into the night."

"I…" Tress took a deep breath. "I want to join your crew."

"Join us?" Crow laughed. "Just earlier today you were cursing us for having killed your family."

"I lied, Captain. I wanted to make you feel sorry for me, so you'd take pity and feed me. I know you saw through that. Your kick proved it. I shouldn't have lied."

"Then that wasn't your family on the ship?"

"I was a stowaway," Tress said. "Didn't belong there any more than I belong in Shimmerbay. I think I might belong here."

Crow didn't reply at first. She unscrewed the top of her canteen, a rattling sound in the night. Tress thought she could track the captain's thoughts. If Tress *hadn't* lost anyone, if she *wasn't* angry at the crew…

Captain Crow stood up, a shadow in the night. "Run along anyway. No place for you here. We don't need you scrubbing the deck all day, underfoot. I save that job for punishment, and with you doing it, you've taken away one of my tools for ship discipline. Everyone on this ship must have a place, and you have none. Unless

you'd like to take the role of our anchor."

Crow turned toward her cabin, smoke drifting up from her pipe. Tress nearly ran off as she'd been told. And yet…

A piece of her hated being bullied. Hated it enough to overcome her reluctance to impose. She'd hated how the duke bullied Charlie. She'd hated how the inspectors bullied the dockworkers. And she hated it more here, facing down a woman who thought she could do whatever she wanted, to whomever she wanted.

"You don't have a ship's sprouter," Tress said.

Captain Crow froze at the door to her cabin.

"He's dead," Tress continued. "You need someone for the job, but the Dougs won't do it. Otherwise you'd have pressed one of them into it by now. They made *me* fill the zephyr pouches. They're frightened of spores."

"And you aren't?" Crow asked from the darkness.

"Of course I am," Tress said. "But I figure a healthy respect for them helps a sprouter stay alive."

Silence. Crow was a shadow in the night, watching her, judging her, smoke puffing up into the emerald sky.

"Aye," Crow said. "You're right on that. Suppose maybe there *is* a place for you here. You did cross the spores on foot. Took a zephyr explosion to the face. Still willing to work with spores, eh? Yes indeed…I could make use of you. In fact, I might have the *perfect* place for you."

Tress frowned to herself. Were they participating in the same conversation?

"Welcome to the *Crow's Song* then, ship's sprouter," the captain said, pushing into her cabin. "You'll forfeit your share of loot from our first three plunders, but can take an officer's portion after that. Also, you can't eat with the others. Go to Fort for leftovers. Sprouters are a strange lot, and I don't want you getting spores into the food."

"I… Yes, Captain."

"And don't lie to me again. Or we'll be finding out what happens to a human when they swallow a pouch of zephyr spores. Dr. Ulaam has always wondered." Crow raised her canteen to her lips as she shut her cabin door.

Knees soft as lard, Tress flopped down on the deck, then pulled her red inspector's coat tight. She was terrified by what she'd done, but determined. She knew it was right; she *felt* it.

For better or worse, Tress was a pirate now.

PART
4

The next day, Captain Crow woke Tress with a shout. That should have been Tress's first clue that something was odd, as it didn't involve kicking. Crow passed up opportunities to cause physical pain about as often as banks provide free samples. Instead Crow led Tress through the middle deck to a room with a very large padlock on the door. The type you use to make a statement.

"You really aren't afraid of spores, girl?" Crow said as she counted over the keys on her keyring.

"I said that I am afraid, Captain. It's just that lately, everything and everyone seems inclined to try to kill me. So I guess spores are simply one more, no more notable than the others."

"No more notable?" Crow said, selecting the correct key. "Well, that's an encouraging attitude. Encouraging indeed, my red-coated sprouter."

The click of the key in the lock had an ominous tone. The sound of a trap being sprung. Crow removed the key from her ring and handed it to Tress. "This will be yours now, girl."

Tress took it, but had not missed that the ring held a second key identical to this one. Crow pushed through the door, and Tress glanced down the hall to where several Dougs were watching and whispering to one another. When the door opened, they stepped backward.

Bracing herself, Tress followed Crow into the room. It did not seem so fearsome as to warrant such a reaction from the Dougs. The small chamber, longer than it was wide, had a single porthole at the end looking out at the sea. Spores churned up from the ship's passing, occasionally rising to cover the window, briefly plunging the room into darkness.

It had a bunk on one end that was pure *luxury* to Tress, with a *blanket*, a *mattress*, and a *pillow*. Sure, the mattress looked lumpy, the pillow was small, and the blanket likely hadn't been washed since the invention of vowels. But when you've been sleeping on the deck, you learn to grade on a curve.

Along the wall opposite the bunk was a small worktable. Above it, a set of drawers was built into the wall. The only other item of note was the large mirror hanging above the table, giving the room an open feeling—and revealing to Tress *exactly* how much of a mess her hair was. It evoked the impression of an eldritch horror escaping from its long slumber to stretch tentacles in all directions, disintegrating reality, seeking the lives of virgins, and demanding a sacrifice of a hundred bottles of expensive conditioner.

Crow stepped over to a door nestled in the corner, near the head of the bunk. She pulled that open and gestured inside, revealing a stall—barely tall enough to stand up in, with a floor that lowered two feet down into a basin. With a drain? And a spigot high on the wall?

A *bath*? If the bunk was luxury, the idea of a bath was *paradise*.

"We keep that spigot hooked to a barrel filled with water," Crow said. "Let us know when you want it refilled. Weev always needed a lot of it for his experiments."

"…Experiments?"

"With spores," Crow said, sighing. "You'll have to keep up, girl, if you're going to train as our sprouter. *Any* time you work with spores, do it in this chamber unless you get *specific* permission from me. I'd even prefer you fill the zephyr spore charges for the cannons in here."

"I understand," Tress said.

"Be sure you do," Crow said. "Your entire chamber is reinforced with aluminum, but there's a silver lining beyond in case something breaks through. Despite all those protections, you could rip my ship apart if you're careless."

Tress nodded.

“You have no idea, do you?” Crow said. “What you’re doing? What will be expected of you? You have *no clue* how dangerous your job will be. Do you really want to go through with this?”

“Do I get to sleep in that bed?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m in.”

Crow smiled. It would have been *less* unnatural to see those shining teeth and curling lips on an actual crow. “I’ll send Ulaam to brief you. But before you grow too fond of your new accommodations, be sure to have a look at the floor.”

The captain sauntered off, taking a swig from her canteen. Tress sat on the mattress, trying to discern what the captain had meant by that last comment. The floor looked normal. Wooden planks, though a little dusty, since it didn’t appear that anyone had cleaned the room since Weev’s death.

As she considered it, that troubled her. Why hadn’t anyone claimed this room? A bed, a mirror, and *running water*? The moment Weev died, the sailors should have been fighting for a chance to…

Then it struck her. There was no silver in the floor.

She would have seen it sooner, if she’d been more experienced with ship life. Except for one little section near the cannon, all decks—save the hold—of the *Crow’s Song* were inset with silver. This was a fine, expensive merchant vessel (they could even afford some aluminum, which wasn’t as costly at this point as it had once been, but still pricey), and it was built to keep its occupants comfortable and—most importantly—safe.

Except in here. Where the sprouter needed to work with spores. Tress glanced at the porthole, and the verdant spores rolling past. Each time the ship surged in the sea and the room plunged into darkness, her heart sped up a little.

Moons. No wonder no one else had wanted the room. You’d have to be insane to sleep in here.

Huck found her snoring softly a short time later. One shouldn’t blame her. Sleeping on the deck hadn’t really involved much sleeping.

“Tress?” Huck whispered. “What’s this? Your own room?”

She sat up groggily. “Yup. It’s a deathtrap, but a comfortable one. Where have you been?”

“They got a cat, Tress,” Huck grumbled, eyeing the door. “An actual *cat*. This is an insult of the gravest kind. As in the kind that

leads to my grave…"

"Stick close to me," Tress said. "I'll try to keep you away from it."

Huck shivered visibly. "I *hate* cats," he whispered. "Plus, how stupid do you have to be to get a cat because of *one rat*? Like, what is going to eat more of your food? Me, or the thing ten times my weight? Idiot humans. Er. Other humans. Not named Tress."

"I'm my own brand of idiot, Huck," she said. "Considering I'm still on this ship."

With a sigh, she heaved herself off the bed and went above to fetch her sack of cups. She returned to the room, where she began arranging the cups on her worktable, thinking of the stories Charlie had told her when she'd shown him each one.

She felt like a traitor. Staying and helping people she barely knew? Instead of hunting for a way to save him? She whispered prayers to the moons as she arranged the cups, and promised herself that she *would* find a way. If she could help this crew, and they weren't willing to take her to the Midnight Sea in return, maybe they could still help her in some other way? Like gathering money for the ransom?

That made her feel sick. She didn't want to rob people to save Charlie. In that moment, holding the cup with the butterfly, she acknowledged something. She could never pay a ransom—and she wouldn't resort to piracy to do it. She'd have to find some other way to save Charlie.

But how? What could she do?

As she was contemplating this, fighting to keep her tears in check, a peppy voice spoke from the doorway.

"Need a hand? Hmmmmm?"

"You didn't *literally* bring me a hand, did you, Ulaam?" Tress asked.

Ulaam furtively tucked one arm behind his back. "Would I be so crass, Miss Tress?"

"…Yes? It's why I asked?"

The ashen-skinned man (person? thing?) grinned and stepped into the room. Behind him, I peeked in—but as Tress didn't have any marmosets, I wasn't interested at the moment.

"You know about all of this, Doctor?" Tress said, waving to the small room with the basin and the spigot. "The captain said it was for experiments."

"Yes, Weev loved the experiment of 'How can I con everyone else

into letting me take warm baths?' They keep the water barrel out in the sun; while I doubt your washing will be *toasty*, you also won't be freezing any bits off." He glanced at her. "If you do, be sure to save them for me, hmmmm?"

"So it *is* a bath," Tress said.

"Well, Weev *did* need a room where he could manipulate spores —and sometimes activate them—without posing too much danger to the crew. That required a ceramic basin that would hold water. He merely extrapolated. He was a cunning fellow. Except that part at the end." Ulaam shook his head. "What a waste of a corpse."

"Captain says I'll need to take on some of Weev's duties if I'm going to stay on the ship. Was there more than the work with the zephyr spores?"

"You'll want to practice with roseite, for sealing breaches in emergencies," Ulaam said. "And in growing verdant without breaking anything, as the vines can be emergency food. Yes, they *are* edible. I suppose anything is, if you're optimistic enough!"

"I'm optimistic!" I said, looking in again. "I once ate an entire rock. Had to fight off its family first though." I growled and wandered away.

Tress mostly missed what I said, focused as she was on my ailments. "Do you know what his…issue is, Doctor?" she asked.

"Hoid has too many issues to count," Ulaam said, poking through the drawers above her table. "I wouldn't trouble yourself with his situation. He's nearly as deft at untying knots as he is at creating them."

She nodded and eyed her bunk. When Ulaam left, could she take another nap? Or would she be reprimanded for loafing?

"Yes…" Ulaam said absently, "Hoid should have known better than to tangle with the Sorceress. In fact, he probably *did* know better. Frightening, how infrequently he lets that influence what he actually decides to *do*."

Tress felt a start that drove away thoughts of sleep. "The *Sorceress*?"

"Hmmmm? Yes, what did you *think* happened to him? He puts on a brave front, pretending to be just an ordinary idiot, but I assure you that he's instead the *extraordinary* kind. Remarkable really. I always say, when trouble troubles you, keep a stiff's upper lip! Or several."

"There's someone on this ship," Tress said, choosing her words

carefully, “who *knows the way* to the Sorceress? Who has been there before, and escaped alive?”

“Technically, yes,” Ulaam said. “But I haven’t the faintest idea how Hoid did it—I found him like this after I arrived on the planet in response to his letter.”

“On the...planet?” she asked. “Like, you’re from the stars?” She’d heard stories of visitors from the stars, but had thought them fancies. Even if there did seem to be more and more of them these days, talked of among sailors.

“Hmm?” Ulaam said. “Oh, yes. Not from a star really, but a planet that orbits one. Regardless, I doubt you’ll be able to get anything useful out of Hoid with that curse in place.”

She put thoughts of such distant locations—and the cups they must have—out of her mind for now. There…there was someone here who could help her find Charlie! Hoid could be her solution! She felt an enormous sense of relief, then a sudden strike of panic. If she had left the ship, she would never have known.

She sat down with a dazed expression, realizing that I was in fact the key she needed. She formed a real plan at last; one she could maybe accomplish. Find out from me how to reach the Sorceress, and perhaps learn how to deal with her.

Still a daunting prospect. But it was better than what she’d had before. And as she sat there, she considered that perhaps this crew —and the kindly people on it, trapped in their own kind of prison— were *exactly* what she needed in order to save Charlie.

THE ASSISTANT CANNONMASTER

"There are twelve seas," Ann explained as she sat on the railing of the ship, knocking her heels rhythmically on the wood. "And therefore, twelve kinds of spores. How could you not know that?"

"I lived all my life in a little mining town," Tress explained. "Yes, we always talked about there being twelve seas and twelve moons. But I've learned so much in the last few days, I figured I should confirm things like that."

She's right to ask, Ann, Fort said, holding up his sign. **There are, after all, thirteen kinds of spores.**

"No there ain't," Ann said. "Don't you be spreading that lie."

It's not a lie, he wrote. **It's a legend. Different thing entirely.**

"Nonsense is the proper term," Ann said. "People can't even make up their minds on what color 'bone spores' are supposed to be. White or black? Or both? Listen, Tress. There are *twelve* kinds of spores."

Tress nodded. They were at the prow of the ship, on the upper deck, near the forward cannon. Tress hadn't been surprised to find Ann here—the lanky carpenter often hung around the cannon, shooting it glances like a teenager with a crush. However, Tress *had* been surprised to see Fort sitting on deck this morning, darning socks. A part of her had believed him a permanent fixture of his office.

For her part, Tress was carefully counting the pouches of zephyr spores in the gunnery barrel. She'd asked Laggart, and he'd said they should maintain forty on hand. She figured that counting them gave her a good excuse to move them out of the barrel into an aluminum box, where they'd be safe from the ship's silver.

"Twelve seas," Tress said. "How many have you seen, Ann?"

"Three," she said proudly. "The Emerald Sea, the Sapphire Sea, and the Rose Sea."

Impressive, Fort wrote.

"I know, isn't it?"

I've been to ten.

"What?" Ann sat up straight. "Liar."

Why would I lie?

"You're *literally* a pirate," Ann said. "Everyone knows you can't trust those types."

Fort rolled his eyes expressively, then turned back to his work on his socks. Tress hesitated, looking at her box of pouches. Had that been the twenty-second or twenty-third she'd just counted? With a soft groan, she piled them all back into the barrel and started again.

"Which two?" Ann asked, tapping Fort to make him look up. "Which ones haven't you been to?"

Not hard to guess, Fort wrote.

"Midnight and Crimson Seas?"

He nodded.

"The Midnight Sea," Tress said as she counted. "That's where the Sorceress lives."

"Yeah," Ann said. "And the Crimson Sea is the domain of the dragon. But that's not why people don't sail them. It's the spores, Tress. You need to know this stuff, if you're gonna sprout. Most types of spores are deadly, but two are downright catastrophic. Stay away from crimson spores and midnight spores, all right?"

"All right," Tress said. "You have to go through the Crimson though to get to the Midnight, right? So I'm unlikely to ever do that." She frowned. "Why do you have to go through one to get to the other? Can't you just sail around the Crimson to get to the Midnight?"

"Not unless you can sail through several mountain ranges," Ann said. "I suppose you could sail all around the world, then come upon the Midnight from behind."

It's one of the reasons the Sorceress set up there, Fort

explained. **She controls trade through the region—the passage that connects the planet. Only her ships can sail the Midnight.**

"Been years," Ann noted, "since there was any trade though. The king doesn't want to pay tariffs, and so it's war instead."

As if he thinks he can beat her, Fort said, shaking his head. **He can't even get a proper fleet through the Crimson. Too dangerous.**

Tress nodded. These seemed like things she probably should have known already. She was playing catch-up, but for a second time she was glad she hadn't left these people. She realized that only one member of the crew likely had experience with the Sorceress personally—but all of them had information that could help her.

"There are twenty-five pouches here," she said, finishing. "So I need to make fifteen more."

"Without blowing off your face this time," Ann said.

"I didn't blow it off."

"Technically, I'm sure *some* pieces of it were removed," Ann said. "Too bad you got that salve. You'd look badass with a scar or two on your face."

Tress gave a noncommittal shrug to that. Then, as Ann returned to pestering Fort, Tress quietly undid the latch that opened the false bottom of the barrel and counted. Five hidden cannonballs, each a little larger than her fist.

With Huck acting as lookout, she'd retrieved some ordinary ones from the ship's hold. No one guarded them. Who would steal them? But now, trying to keep herself from sweating at the subterfuge, she began slipping them from her sack and swapping them for the ones in the barrel's false bottom.

She was certain she'd be noticed at any moment. But people rarely watch you as much as you think; they're too busy worrying whether you are watching *them*. So Tress was able to, one at a time, replace Laggart's secret cannonballs with ordinary ones. Then she latched the hidden bottom and replaced the twenty-five zephyr spore pouches.

The swap performed, she pointedly dried her hands and did *not* poke at her mask. Anyone can blow their face off by accident—I mean, who hasn't—but if you do it twice in a row, you look really silly.

Tress cinched closed her sack. She still didn't know what she'd do with those sabotaged cannonballs. Hide them in her cabin? Drop

them off the boat in secret?

"Hey Tress," Ann said. "When you're making charges, you think you could maybe whip me up a few extra? So I can practice?"

"Don't see why not," Tress said. "Assuming the captain says it's all right."

"Yeah," Ann said. "Of course." Though there was something in her tone, reminiscent of how you might talk about that project you've been planning to finish "tomorrow." She wandered off, but only after trailing her fingers along the length of the cannon.

Fort had been focused on his work, and had therefore missed the conversation. While his condition leads to plenty of difficulties, I will say I've always envied his ability to—by looking away—completely excise from his life most of the stupid things people say.

Tress settled down on the deck in front of him, catching his attention. "What's up with Ann and the cannons?" Tress asked. "I thought she was the ship's assistant cannonmaster."

Suppose she still is, Fort wrote. **Didn't ever officially get removed from the post. She won't be firing guns anytime soon though.**

Tress's breath caught. "What did she do?" she whispered, leaning in.

Are you whispering? Fort wrote back.

"Um…yes."

That's cute.

"Ann. Are you going to tell me about her or not?"

What will you trade me for the information?

"Do we *have* to negotiate every time, Fort?" Tress asked. "Can't we just chat like friends?"

But the negotiation is the fun part! he wrote. **It's what tells me about you. What you're willing to give up, what you value. Come on. Doesn't it excite you to try to find the best deal?**

"I…don't really know."

What will you tell me to get me to talk about Ann? Information for information. You're distracting me from repairing these socks, you know. I can't sew and watch the board at the same time. So you owe me.

"But I don't know anything interesting to trade."

Oh? And why are you here? What possessed a nice girl from a small town to steal an inspector's coat and go out pretending to be a pirate?

She leaned in, speaking softly despite what he'd said before. "My ignorance is *that* obvious?"

Girl, if you'd been sailing the spore sea for longer than a week before we found you, I'll eat my own cooking. So why are you out here?

"I'm looking for someone," she said. "Someone dear to me."

Ah, Fort wrote. **So you're searching the seas, like Salay. Hoping that at each new port, you'll at last find the sock that…** He deleted that part. **Sorry. Board isn't always good at predicting. You're hoping to find that PERSON you've lost.**

Tress glanced across the ship toward the helmswoman, who stood as sturdy as the masts, fixed in her place on the quarterdeck, both hands gripping the ship's wheel. As usual, her dark eyes were fixated on the horizon with the kind of intense expression people reserved for only the most important of tasks, like finding the last piece of unopened candy in a bag full of wrappers.

She hunted relentlessly for her father. In the face of Salay's confident determination, Tress's own quest seemed laughable.

"It's…not really the same," Tress told Fort. "Salay has no idea where she'll find her father. I know exactly where Charlie is."

Fort nudged her a moment later. **Oh?** he'd written. **Just need to save up some money to get to him, then?**

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid," she said. "The Sorceress has him. Attacked his ship. Took him captive."

Fort's shoulders slumped. **Oh,** he wrote. **I'm sorry.**

"Yeah. I barely have any idea what I'm doing, Fort. But I have to reach him." She grimaced. "I said I'll likely never reach the Midnight. That was kind of a lie. I'm determined to get there. Somehow."

If the Sorceress attacked his ship, he's dead. I'm sorry. You should probably move on.

"He's alive," Tress said. "She asked for a ransom from the king to free Charlie. I thought…maybe I could make enough money to convince the king to pay it."

Tress, Fort wrote, **the Sorceress doesn't ask for money as ransom. She asks for souls, usually from the royal bloodline. Mere money would never satisfy her.**

Tress blushed, feeling like an utter lunatic. She'd already realized that she wouldn't be able to pay his way free, but still, the depth of her ignorance was disturbing. Like a fish trying very hard to jump

out of its tank in order to escape, she'd been trying to solve a problem before stopping to wonder if she even understood her situation.

Look, if this Charlie was kept for ransom, he's likely a nobleman. Right?

"Yes," Tress whispered.

That lot don't care about people like us, Fort wrote. **I'm sorry, but it's the truth. You'd best move on.**

"Maybe," Tress said.

Well, you gave me information. Only fair that I give you what you wanted. I can tell you about Ann.

"I didn't tell you anything important, Fort," Tress said. "You don't have to take that in trade."

Ah, he wrote. **But the information about Ann is barely worth anything. Everyone knows it. You'd have found out soon anyway.**

"You acted like it was some big secret!" Tress said.

No. I just asked what you wanted to trade. He grinned, poking her in the arm with a knuckle, then continued writing. **Don't look indignant. Revealing your emotions makes it easier for people to get a good deal out of you. That one is free.**

Ann was given the job of assistant cannonmaster because she asked for it after the last one died. But no one thought to have her fire one of the blasted things first.

"And…?" Tress asked.

That woman has worse aim than a drunk man riding a three-legged llama, Fort wrote. **She once fired a pistol at a target, but managed to nearly hit ME—and I was standing next to her. The first time she manned the cannon, her aim was so far off, the only thing NOT in danger was her target.**

"Moons," Tress said. "Maybe…she just needs more practice."

I'll let you teach her, then. I'll be safely boarded up in my room, maybe with some armor on. Fort eyed her. **Some things aren't meant to be, girl. Sometimes you simply have to accept that.**

"You're talking about me. And Charlie."

Maybe. Listen, Tress. Even if he's still alive, the Sorceress will have cursed him like poor old Hoid. She uses a lot of different types, but she always puts one on her captives, to keep them pliable.

“How do you know so much about it?” Tress asked.

Captain told me, Fort explained. **When she had me trade to get Hoid on our ship.**

“The captain *specifically* wanted Hoid on the ship?” Tress asked. “Why?”

Don’t know. She heard about his curse and his trip to the Sorceress. Getting him was a poor deal, since his former shipmates were happy to be rid of him. Captain insisted though.

Fort shook his head, considering the damage to his reputation once people found out how much he’d traded to get a lunatic to be their cabin boy.

Tress’s interest deepened, however. Captain Crow had manipulated the crew into becoming pirates, then forced them to become deadrunners—because she wanted them to sail dangerous seas. And she’d specifically been watching for someone cursed by the Sorceress?

Could the captain be looking to visit the Sorceress herself?

Tress looked toward Crow. And then, Tress took the singular step that separated her from people in most stories. The act, it might be said, that *defined* her as a hero. She did something so incredible, I can barely express its majesty.

I should consider this more, Tress thought to herself, *and not jump to conclusions.*

THE CURSED MAN

Perhaps you are confused at why I, your humble storyteller, would make such a fuss about this. Tress stopped, wondered if she'd jumped to a conclusion, and decided to reconsider? Nothing special, right?

Wrong. So very, soul-crushingly wrong.

Worldbringers like myself spend decades combing through folk tales, legends, myths, histories, and drunken bar songs looking for the most unique stories. We hunt for bravery, cleverness, heroism. And we find no shortage of such virtues. Legends are silly with them.

But the person who is willing to reconsider their assumptions? The hero who can sit down and reevaluate their life? Well, now *that* is a gemstone that truly glitters, friend.

Perhaps you would prefer a story about someone facing a dragon. Well, *this* isn't *that* kind of story. (Which makes it even more remarkable that Tress still does that eventually. But kindly stop getting ahead of me.) I can understand why you would want tales of people like Linji, who tried to sail around the world with no Aviar.

I, however, would trade a dozen Linjis for one person who is willing to sit down for a single blasted minute and think about what they're doing. Do you know how many wars could have been prevented if just one person in charge had stopped to think, "You

know, maybe we should double-check; perhaps blinking twice *isn't* an insult in their culture"?

Do you know how many grand romances would have avoided tragedy if the hero had thought, "You know, maybe I should ask her if she likes me first"?

Do you know how many protracted adventures might have been shortened if the heroine had stopped to wonder, "You know, maybe I should look extra carefully to see if the thing I'm searching for has been with me the entire time"?

I'm drowning in bravery, cleverness, and heroism. Instead, kindly give me a little common sense. At that moment, Tress was downright majestic.

I need more information, Tress thought. *Before I decide that I know what the captain's plan is. I need to find a way to spy on her. Maybe I can use Huck again.*

She nodded—and in that moment, Tress saved herself a huge amount of trouble. The captain's plan had *nothing* to do with the Sorceress, after all, but *everything* to do with why the crew were so frightened of her.

Tress picked up her sack—pretending it wasn't full of cannonballs, which was as hard as it sounded—and carried it to the aft cannon, which was set up on the quarterdeck. She performed a similar swap there (placing the cannonballs she took in a separate bag within her larger one) while counting zephyr spore charges.

Then she hauled her bag belowdecks, where she stowed it in her room. From there she went looking for me. Now, normally this would also have been a shining example of common sense on her part. Everyone can use a little more Wit in their lives. Except me. I could stand to lose a pound or two.

Unfortunately, I wasn't exactly in the best state of mind during this voyage. She found me playing cards with a group of the Dougs. I was wearing a shoe around my neck, tied by the laces, as I'd decided it was certain to be the absolute *soul* of fashion the following season. I'd forgotten to wear pants, as one does, and my underclothing needed a good washing. Actually, all of me did.

I was trying to play a game I'd invented called "Kings" where everyone held their cards backward, so you didn't know what you had but everyone else did. I can imagine several interesting applications of this now—but back then the only interesting part was how easily the Dougs won my wages off me, followed by my

shoe.

I still have no idea what I did with the other one.

Once the Dougs were finished taking me for what little I was worth, they scrambled off to find some other victim. I sat there, wondering if perhaps I should start wearing a sock around my neck, until Tress settled down beside me.

"Would you like to play Kings?" I asked with a grin. "I still have some undershorts I can bet!"

"Um, no thanks," Tress said. "Hoid, I know you visited the Sorceress. Do you…remember anything about it?"

"Yup!" I said.

"Great! What can you tell me?"

"C…c…c…can't!" I said, tapping my head. "Words don't work that way, kiddo. She makes them into something else!"

"I don't understand," Tress said.

"Neither do I!" I replied. "That's the problem! Can't say anything at all about what you might think! It's p…p…p…" I shrugged, unable to form the word.

"Your…curse forbids you from talking about your curse?" Tress guessed.

I winked. Mostly because I had something in my eye. But in this case, Tress had guessed correctly. The Sorceress was quite specific with each geas: if you tried to talk about it, you'd stutter or the words would die halfway out of your lips. You couldn't even tell people you were cursed unless they already knew.

"So," Tress said, "if I want you to lead me to the Sorceress, I have to find a way to break your curse—without knowing anything about it. Plus, I have to do that without any help from you whatsoever."

I took her hands in mine. I looked her in the eyes. I took a deep breath, trembling.

"I once ate an entire watermelon in one sitting," I told her. "And it gave me diarrhea."

Tress sighed, pulling her hands free. "Right, right. I guess finding a way to break your curse is *slightly* less impossible than finding my way to the Sorceress on my own. That's something, at least."

There *was* still a part of me—deep down—that knew what was going on. The Sorceress was cruel like that. Sure, turning a man into a simpleton is fun—but *true* torture lies in letting him remain just aware enough to be horrified.

That sensate part of me scrambled to find some way to help.

Ulaam had been useless, of course. That's the problem with immortals—they get used to sitting around waiting for problems to work themselves out.

But here was someone willing to help. What could I say? What could I do? Only a sliver of me was still awake, and it had almost no control. Plus, every time I tried to say anything about my specific predicament, the curse would activate, driving me back and prompting me to do something monstrous, like wear socks with sandals.

That glimmer of awareness started to fade. And I seized upon that. My own stupidity. The curse, like many magics of its ilk, depended on how the subject thought—on their Intent. I could use that, I knew.

The spark flared up, like a midnight fire as the coals shifted. I reached toward Tress and blanked my mind as I forced out a string of words.

"Listen, this is important," I said to her. "I promise. You must bring me to your planet, Tress. Repeat that."

"Bring you…to my planet?"

"Yes, yes! I can save you if you do that."

"But you're already here!"

"Here what?" I said, having deliberately forgotten what I'd said. "Planets don't matter. For now, look for the group of six stars, Tress!"

Tress hesitated. Six stars? Unfortunately, in that exclamation, my strength was spent. I sat back, adopted a goofy grin, and decided to do some empirical research regarding the flavors of different toes.

With a sigh, Tress returned to her quarters. She'd left the door open for Huck, and so wasn't surprised when she arrived and found...

Whimpering?

She burst into the room to find the ship's cat—Knocks—crouched and staring under the bed, tail waggling. Tress threw the thing out the door and slammed it, and in the silence that followed she could distinctly make out the sounds of a hyperventilating rat.

"Huck?" she asked, getting down on her hands and knees, peering beneath the bed. She made him out in the corner, squeezed into the space between the wood of the bed's leg and the wall. As he saw her, he came timidly toward her, and she scooped him up, feeling him tremble in her hands.

"It's gone," she said. "I'm sorry, Huck."

He didn't speak—a rare occasion where he seemed completely without breath or words. He just cringed there in her hands, looking more...well, like a rat than he ever had before.

Finally he spoke, his voice trembling. "Perhaps you can leave the door locked from now on. There's a crack in the floor, and I can squeeze in that way, after climbing the post in the hallway below."

"All right," Tress said. "Are you...going to be okay?"

Huck glanced at the door. "Yeah, sure," he whispered. "Give me a little time. I...still can't believe they got a cat."

"You're intelligent, Huck," Tress said. "You can handle a common cat."

"Sure. Yeah. No problem. But Tress...I don't know. It's always watching. Prowling. Cats are supposed to sleep twenty-six hours a day. How can I use my intelligence, how can I plan, knowing it's *watching*?"

After a few minutes, he seemed to relax. He nodded to her, so she set him on the footboard, then lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling—which was the upper deck of the ship. She could hear sailors crossing it, feet thumping. Wood creaking as the ship rocked. Spores made a constant low, hushed sound as they scraped past. Like a whisper. Someone had carved parts of the ceiling with a knife. Crude little patterns of crossing lines.

"I hope your day has been better than mine," Huck said, perched on the footboard of the bed. The entire thing had a nice railing to keep her from rolling out as the ship swayed.

"It's been somewhat frustrating," Tress said. "But not life-threatening." What she wanted wasn't nearly so important as what he needed, and she felt guilty for focusing on herself. "Your problem with the cat is more pressing. Maybe we could keep it extra well fed, so it doesn't want to hunt you?"

"Cats don't stop hunting because they're full, Tress. They're like people in that regard."

"Sorry," she said. "We don't have cats on the Rock."

"Sounds like a wonderful place."

"It was sweet and tranquil," she said. "And though the smog above town is pretty terrible, people tend to treat one another well. It's a good place. An honest place."

"I'd like to go there someday. I know you're thirsty for adventure, but I've had plenty."

“You could go,” Tress said. “You don’t need to stay with me, Huck.”

“Tired of me already?”

“What!” she said, sitting up. “That’s not what I meant!”

“You’re too polite, girl,” he said, twitching his nose. “I’ll assume that you know less about rats than you do about cats. Try to imagine what it’s like to be roughly the size of a sandwich, and to have most of the world consider you as tasty as one. Trust me, you’d do what I have.”

“Which is?”

“Find a sympathetic human and stick close to them,” Huck said. “Besides, I have a good feeling about you, remember?”

“But you’ve got to have family somewhere.”

“Yeah, but they don’t much care for me,” he said.

“Are they…like you?”

“You mean, can they talk?” Huck said. “Yes.” He paused, his head cocked, as if searching for the right way to explain. “I come from a place a lot like the one you came from. My kind has lived there for generations. But my kin, they thought it was time to go. See the world. They dragged me off for my own good. *That* didn’t go well.

“They wouldn’t much like me hanging around with you. I’m not supposed to talk to your kind, you see. Still, like I said, I’ve got a good feeling about you. And so, I’m staying close. But I certainly wouldn’t mind if *you* decided—of your own free will—to head someplace less exciting…”

Tress tried to imagine it. A land full of talking rats? It sounded exotic and interesting. The twelve seas were a strange and incredible place, full of wonders. Huck kept talking, telling her about life as a rat. And there was a calming sense to his voice. It soothed her, and she found herself relaxing, her eyes tracking the carvings on the ceiling. Someone—perhaps her predecessor—had taken a lot of time to carve them. In fact…did those bursts of crossing lines look like…stars?

Tress sat up, cutting off Huck. He scampered along the bed railing over beside her. “What?”

Stars. Carved in little bursts. A single star there, then two stars close together next to it. Then three…all across the wood of the ceiling, as if someone had stood on the bed with a knife and used the point to scrape them.

No groupings of six stars, she thought.

“What?” Huck said. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing,” Tress said, flopping back down. “I thought, for a moment, that Hoid had said something important.”

“You’ve been listening to *him*? Tress, I thought you were smart, for a human. Hoid is…you know.”

“He said something about six stars,” Tress said. “But there are no bunches of six.”

“I can see that,” Huck said. “I told you he’s a lunatic, Tress. No use in trying to figure out what he means.”

“I suppose,” she said.

“Besides,” Huck noted, “those look more like explosions. The stars are under the bed.”

Tress froze, then leaped off the bed and pulled herself underneath. The bottom of the bed frame was carved as well—and with patterns that were indeed more starlike. There was one patch of six stars. Feeling like she might be submitting to lunacy herself, Tress pushed it.

Something clicked, and a small latch opened on the side of the frame. Inside, Tress found a small aluminum container the size of a matchbox. Huck climbed onto her shoulder as she pushed it open.

In it she found midnight-black spores.

THE PREY

So how did I know?

Well, I believe you've been told. I'm an expert at being places I'm not supposed to be. I have an innate sixth sense for mystery. In my current state, I might have thought vests with no shirt underneath to be the absolute height of fashion, but I was still fully capable of a little constructive snooping.

Tress's breath caught. Huck hissed softly.

Midnight spores. Somehow, Weev had gotten ahold of midnight spores. She was reminded of what the captain had said, that all sprouters were—to one extent or another—crazy.

Weev, she thought, might have been a little extra so. (Tress was being generous. I'd have called him crazier than a nitroglycerin smoothie.)

"Put those away," Huck said. "No, better, spread them over the silver. Kill them, Tress. Midnight spores are dangerous."

"In what way?" she asked. "What do they do?"

"Terrible things."

"All spores do terrible things," Tress said. "What do these do *specifically*?"

"I…don't know," Huck admitted. "But I feel like you're *way* too relaxed about holding them."

Perhaps she was. But danger is like icy water; you can get used to

it if you take it slowly. She tucked the little box of spores safely back in its hidden compartment. She'd have to see if Ulaam knew—

She jumped as the bell rang up above. Three quick peals, a warning to everyone on board. A ship had been spotted in the distance, and the captain had decided to pursue.

Tress scrambled out of her room, but then stood in the hallway, not wanting to crowd the Dougs as they hastened to the top deck. It was excruciating to wait, as she didn't want to miss anything.

She needn't have worried.

When she finally reached the deck, she found the Dougs clustered anxiously near the railing, looking out at a distant ship. As usual, the *Crow's Song* flew a royal merchant's flag. They wouldn't announce their pirate nature until the proper dramatic moment. Like the third-act twist of a play, only with the added bonus of grand larceny.

What followed was an extended chase that took five hours.

The *Crow's Song* was faster than most ships, particularly after it dropped the ballast it used to sit lower in the spores, mimicking a merchant ship fully laden with goods in the hold. But "speed" is a relative term at sea—particularly the spore sea, when the seethe could stop or start at any moment.

Tress hadn't realized how unusual it had been for her first vessel to be caught by surprise. This second pursuit required exacting work from the crew and the helmswoman, who slowly but surely ran down their prey.

The hours made Tress's tension mount. This was it. The final test of her plan to swap the cannonballs. She grew increasingly certain she had failed. Surely someone had discovered what she'd done. Surely she wasn't clever enough to trick seasoned killers like Laggart and the captain.

Her heart nearly leaped from her chest when Crow shouted the order. "Forward cannon to bear! All sailors, take arms!"

The Dougs ran for their muskets—though the ship they were chasing was still far away. Tress didn't try to arm herself. Considering how she'd fired a musket precisely zero times in her life, she figured the best way to keep her digits attached was to continue that perfect record.

She did, however, position herself near the prow, where she could witness Ann begging Laggart to let her have the first shot. He chewed her out and sent her to stand with the others—where one of

the Dougs pointedly took the pistol from her hand and put a cutlass in it instead. Ann had another pistol out a moment later, slipped from the holster on the back of her belt.

"Warning shot, Cannonmaster!" Crow shouted.

Tress held her breath. Laggart swiveled the cannon with a crank, then sighted with his spyglass before using another lever to raise the cannon's barrel a few inches. He continued this process, exacting and precise, making adjustments. Finally, he pulled a wet firing stick from the bucket of water at his station.

He touched it to the firing pan, setting off the zephyr spores with a raucous explosion. The ball soared *directly* at the fleeing ship. This was no warning shot; it would be another "accidental" direct hit—intended to sink, not frighten. Tress heard Ann mutter nearby as she watched the cannonball's trajectory.

Tress steeled herself, her panic mounting as she thought of the poor sailors on that ship.

Then, with what seemed like only moments to spare, the cannonball exploded. Set to detonate like a mortar, it sprayed water across the side of the prey ship—but left the hull unharmed. The sea's response was, of course, immediate. Enormous tentacles of vines erupted from the spore sea, wrapping around the wet side of the ship, gripping the vessel in a deadly embrace. Even from a distance, Tress was certain she could hear the planks groaning.

But the ship's hull did not crack. The precision shot immobilized the ship instead of destroying it.

Though the crew cheered—this meant easy plunder—Laggart cursed softly, his face going red. The shade of a forge the moment before you remove the iron and proceed to lay into it with everything you have.

Captain Crow marched across the deck to the cannon station. Her glare could have skinned a cat, but out loud she said, "Not exactly what I'd call a warning shot, Cannonmaster. But that was…a very clean capture."

"Thank you, Captain," Laggart said. "I apologize for failing you in your request." He punctuated each syllable, as if he were whipping the sounds for coming from his lips.

Tress nearly started hyperventilating from the anxiety. Was Laggart looking at her with a more-surly-than-normal expression? Did he know? If he suspected foul play, there was only one rational culprit.

The captain seemed like she wanted to order another shot, but then she glanced at the cheering Dougs. Even in the twisted lump of smoldering coal that was her heart, Crow understood she needed good morale on her vessel. A quick and easy haul here would accomplish that.

"Run up the pirate's flag, seaman Doug," she said.

In response, their prey fired a flare bright in the air. Surrender. The Dougs cheered again. Tress started to calm down. It…it was working.

Unfortunately, as the *Crow's Song* drew close to the captive ship, the seethe stilled. The *Crow's Song* lurched to a halt, and this instantly dampened everyone's enthusiasm. Tress looked at the Dougs, worried. What was the problem? There were interruptions like this every day.

"Ann?" Tress said, sidling up to her. "What's wrong?"

"The ship surrendered," Ann said, her voice tense, "'cuz they knew they were beaten. With them held by vines, we could maneuver, an' they could not. But now we're both of us stuck. The sea just evened this match. An' they gotta be asking if maybe they shouldn't just…"

She trailed off as a blue puff of zephyr spores rose from the other ship's aft. Followed by a crack.

Followed by a whistle and a *crash* as a cannonball hit the *Crow's Song* right at the prow, where spores met wood.

THE SHARPSHOOTER

Dougs shouted and went scrambling. Ann cursed something incredibly vile relating to what comes out of the business end of a seagull.

"Damn fine shooting," Laggart muttered. "Hit us first shot? They've got quite the cannonmaster."

Crow shoved aside a few Dougs, then calmly raised her weapon. It looked…sleeker than the older muskets the Dougs carried, and had a different sight.

Though the *Crow's Song* had shortened the distance to the other ship, Tress was still amazed as the captain trained her musket toward the enemy, closed one eye, and fired. A man on the distant ship—the one holding the water firing stick as his assistants reloaded the cannon—dropped in a spray of blood.

"Well," Laggart said, "I guess they *had* a damn fine cannonmaster."

"Carpenter and sprouter," the captain said loudly as she lowered her musket and began to reload, dropping a small pouch of zephyr spores down the muzzle. "We've been hit. When the seethe comes again, we'll scoop up half the sea—and everyone on this ship will find out what spores taste like. Perhaps you'd like to do your jobs and prevent that."

"Right, Cap'n!" Ann said, raising her pistol. "Let me just get off one shot before—"

At least a half dozen Dougs grabbed her arm, wrestling for the pistol. The captain ignored them, sighting once again, then dropped the sailor who had been hefting a cannonball to load into the enemy's cannon.

It was the best shooting Tress had ever seen. It was the only shooting, granted. Nevertheless, I'll admit Crow was one of the best shots *I'd* ever seen. And considering that primitive muskets handle like a snake being electrocuted, that is saying something.

"To work, Ann," the captain said, calm—yet somehow threatening, ice crusting her voice. "Or my next shot won't have to travel to another ship."

"Moonshadows," Ann said, stumbling over to Tress. "Those Dougs *really* wanted a chance to use my pistol, eh? Well, let's be on with the cap'n's order. Stop delaying, Tress!" She scrambled belowdecks, Tress following.

"You have your tools?" Ann asked as they reached the middle deck.

"What tools?" Tress asked. "Ann, I only became ship's sprouter this morning! I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Right, right," Ann said, wiping her brow. Above, a cannon shot sounded from their ship. "We need rose spores. There should be a whole bunch of them in Weev's room."

Tress nodded. She led Ann to the room, though the carpenter hesitated at the threshold. Tress continued inside, then pried off the top of a small barrel full of rose spores.

"Get some of those," Ann said, "and put them in one of the metal boxes. The kind you can transport spores in? Yeah, that. Um…I saw Weev use some other equipment too. I don't really know a lot about this, kid."

Tress finished filling the metal box with spores. Then she pulled open the closet, revealing an array of metal tools hanging from pegs on the inside of the door. She didn't see *anything* like the box the sprouter had used on the other ship. Weev, it should be noted, was a *purist*. He preferred the classical tools of the trade, not the modern ones.

"Any of these look right?" Tress asked.

"Oh!" Ann said. "That one with the flat side, like a plate. And that trowel. Grab those."

The second tool did indeed look like a small shovel, but the first one looked less like a plate to Tress and more like a shield. A little

round shield—flat on the front, with a handle on the back to hold it.

The tools had clips on them for hanging from a belt, but there wasn't time for that. Tress gathered them up, along with the spores and an eyedropper bottle of water, then stumbled out to meet Ann—who backed away, hands up.

"Righty-o," Ann said. "Normally, I'd let the sprouter handle the initial patch while I gathered lumber, but I think maybe you could use a little help, eh?"

"Thanks," Tress said, letting Ann lead the way down to the hold. Bright sunlight bathed the normally dim confines, shining in through a hole near the ceiling. The hold was taller than the other decks, putting the hole some nine feet up in the air.

"I'll get a ladder," Ann said. "So, what you need to do is grow some spores in that hole. It don't have to be pretty—I'll do the pretty part with wood over the next few days. We just need that hole filled. Roseite is good at resisting silver, and can last quite a while once in place. So it makes a great plug, assuming you…ya know…don't kill yourself first."

"Any advice on avoiding that last part?" Tress asked, her voice growing more shrill.

"Wish I did, kid. Those are the right two tools, but I stayed real far away whenever Weev broke out the spores. That guy was nuttier than squirrel droppings. No offense."

Ann set up the ladder, then backed away. She didn't offer any further help, but Tress was thankful nonetheless. She climbed to the top of the ladder and looked out at the ocean of spores.

At the moment they were calm, flat, stable. But the instant the seethe started, the ship would move forward—and the verdant spores would come flooding through the gap. Even if the hold had a silver lining, the ship would quickly take on too much weight and stop floating.

Tress didn't hear any more shots from above. She pretended that was a good sign as she set her equipment on a nearby shelf for sacks. Last of all, she opened the aluminum box of spores. They looked like grains of pink salt. Trembling, she tipped the box until a few of them dribbled out onto the edge of the broken wood.

Unfortunately, by the time she had the dropper open and the water ready to squirt, the spores had turned a dark grey. Dead from the silver in the deck just above. Feeling stupid, she closed the box

—but not before a number of those inside had died also.

She took a few deep breaths. Then, forcing herself to keep trying, she put some water on the wood first—then opened the box. Leaning back and shielding her face, she sprinkled a few spores onto the water.

It was a commendable execution of a terrible plan.

The rose spores burst into thick roseite crystals—like big chunks of quartz. While they weren't sharp, some broke up into the ceiling and another shot diagonally past Tress's head—nearly smashing her in the face.

It didn't plug the hole—the crystals left far too much space between them, and their weight caused them to rip off the wood and tumble down: half out into the sea, half down to the bottom of the hold. Tress gasped, belatedly.

"Tress!" Ann said. "Be careful!"

Moonshadows…what was she *doing*? The entire ship was depending on her, but she knew as much about this as she did about weaponized vexillology. (Watch out for the solid-colored flags. They'll getcha.)

You saw that sprouter on the Oot's Dream*,* she reminded herself. *He sealed the hole. The tools were different, but you know what the patch is supposed to look like.*

As she fumbled with the tools, she noticed something. The roseite was still growing. When the large crystals had broken free, they'd left small bits attached to the hull—and those, touching water, were expanding slowly. Like a creeping mold.

Did the same thing happen with verdant spores? Did the vines keep growing if you added more water? She didn't know. But she added some water to the growing roseite spores. And yes, although the growth was slow, they did continue to expand.

Far too slowly to fill the hole, she thought. Still, like the proverbial politician in a dumpster, it was a good start.

She took the tool that resembled a shield and pressed it to the roseite. The crystals responded immediately, pulling toward the metal, which (from the slate grey color) seemed to be simple iron. The other tool, the trowel, made the crystals grow away from it. It was of polished silvery metal. (Steel, for those who compulsively track these things.)

Right, so each tool influenced the growth of the spores. That made sense. Perhaps—

A low, rumbling noise came from outside the hull. A reverberating horror. The sound of spores churning. The seethe was beginning again.

"Tress!" Ann shouted.

No time for contemplation. If those spores flooded in, Tress would be the first to go. She took the shield-tool in her left hand and pressed it to the hole. With her other hand, she grabbed a tiny pinch of two or three spores—no time to worry if her hands were dry enough—and dropped them in the water on the rim of the broken wood.

They exploded, but were pulled to the shield—and it prevented them from going in unexpected directions. The force of it did nearly shove her off the ladder. Ann cried out and grabbed the base of it to steady her, which helped.

As roseite crystals began to grow around the edges of the shield, Tress grabbed the trowel and pushed them away. She was able to angle them to grow toward the sides of the hole, like using mortar that grew as she directed.

Wind in the sails made the ship rock backward, lifting the prow. Tress barely got the crystals to seal the final edge of the hole as the ship crashed forward. Her plug shook and cracked. There had been water on the other edge, but the vines that grew because of it didn't break through—and there wasn't enough water for them to grow big enough to trap the ship.

The moment stretched, pulled taut with anxiety, trembling and holding its breath.

The patch held.

"Oh, moons," Ann said. "You actually did it. Can you…maybe put another layer on, or…"

"Let's not tempt fate," Tress said, trying to pull her shield tool free. It was overgrown with the roseite and affixed in place. "I'll probably need a silver knife to cut this off. Maybe we should try that when we're docked someplace safe."

"Yeah, all right," Ann said, holding the ladder as Tress climbed down. "I'm just glad you were here. Until you took the job, it would have been my duty to patch that. I would've used wood, and that pause in the seethe was short enough that I wouldn't have had nearly enough time."

Another crack sounded above. Gunfire.

"This isn't over yet," Ann said. "Merciful moons, I hope that

patch holds. Come on.”

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Tress made a brief stop in her room to stow the box of spores and her remaining tool—reassuring Huck, who was hiding under the bed again—then hurried up the steps. By the time she arrived, the *Crow's Song* was getting dangerously close to their target.

Three bodies lay bleeding on the deck of the merchant ship. The rest of the crew held up their arms, no visible weapons drawn. It looked like Laggart had tried another cannon shot—because another burst of vines covered the ship's aft section, many of them overgrowing the enemy cannon.

Another of Tress's swapped cannonballs had exploded instead of sinking the ship, but it might not be enough. The merchant vessel had given Crow plenty of excuses to be angry; Tress worried she would order the crew to slaughter everyone aboard that poor vessel. The pirates would have their treasure, and Crow would have her reputation as a deadrunner.

As the *Crow's Song* slowed, several Dougs threw hooks with ropes over to the merchant vessel. Another dropped the anchor. Nervous, Tress looked to the captain, who stood with her musket at the ready.

"All crew," Crow said, "swords out. Prepare to board."

Tress felt a sudden spike of panic. No! After all she had done to protect those—

“Captain!” a voice called. Sharp, commanding.

Everyone turned toward the quarterdeck, where Salay stood, one hand on the ship’s wheel. She locked it in place, now that the ship was anchored, then walked to the steps.

“By tradition,” Salay called, “the duty to engage the captain of a captured ship falls to me, does it not?”

The Dougs kept their weapons trained on the merchant vessel, but none spoke. They knew someone was very likely to be shot in the next few minutes, and didn’t want to seem like they were volunteering.

Crow turned to face Salay straight on, musket held in a loose grip. The helmswoman did not back down, and Tress found herself praying to the moons.

“We have subdued them,” Salay said loudly. “They have surrendered. We became pirates for the freedom. Nothing more.” She stood firm, and her posture made her intent clear. She would *not* stand by and let the merchant crew be slaughtered.

If Crow wanted a massacre today, she’d have to start by killing Salay. Crow could do it; she’d done it to Weev. But how many crewmembers could Crow lose and still have a functioning ship?

“As you say,” Crow finally announced. “Let them know I do not… appreciate the bilging my ship received after they sent up the flare of surrender. That sort of…indiscretion costs lives.”

“They’ll pay more than the normal bounty,” Salay said. “I’ll make sure of it, Captain.”

Tress let out a held breath. Sailors started moving again, throwing more boarding hooks to keep the ships from drifting apart. Salay was the first to hop over to the merchant ship.

Tress sat down on the steps to the quarterdeck, worn out, now feeling like the washrag you find at the very bottom of the bin—the one that had been wadded up, then pressed flat for weeks by the pile.

A shadow fell over her. “We didn’t sink,” Crow said. “That means you did your job.”

Tress nodded.

“She was great, Captain,” Ann said from behind. “A natural, I’d say. Sealed that hole on her second try. Barely seemed terrified by the spores.”

“Indeed,” Crow said, her expression unreadable as she continued looking at Tress. “Ann, don’t you think you should be fitting

planks? In case this…expert work by our new sprouter isn't as durable as it might seem?"

"I suppose." She moved off.

"Ann," the captain said, holding her hand out.

Ann sighed and handed over a pistol she'd found somewhere, then vanished belowdecks.

Crow moved over to watch the merchant ship as Dougs began appearing from its hold bearing rolled rugs—the ship's cargo. The group of merchant sailors huddled on deck, where their captain spoke softly with Salay. He had a squeezed face, with too much forehead and chin, like you were seeing it reflected in a spoon.

Everyone had calmed down save one man: a sailor who knelt on the deck apart from the others. Something about his posture bothered Tress, so she climbed the steps to get a better look through the overgrown vines. Yes, the man was cradling the corpse of one of the people Crow had shot. A friend? Family member?

The weeping man looked up. Reckless, dangerous. Tress opened her mouth to call out a warning, but the man lurched to his feet and pulled a pistol from his belt. With a quivering hand, he pointed it across the gap between ships toward Crow.

Again, everyone froze. Everyone but Captain Crow herself. She stared down that barrel with indifference.

"Smocke!" the merchant captain yelled. "Don't be a lunatic, man! You'll get us all killed!"

The man, Smocke, stood up—stained with his friend's blood—but didn't lower the gun. He also didn't pull the trigger. Captain Crow raised the pistol she'd taken off Ann and pointed it at the man.

Then Crow turned the pistol around and shot herself in the head.

Immediately, *vines* erupted from Crow's skin. They split her cheek and wormed out around her eyes, writhing and twisting. One *caught* the bullet. The skin of her face and hand rippled, as if she had serpents for muscles. The vines wriggled, then withdrew, slithering back into her body.

A drop of blood leaked from the corner of Crow's eye, and a bit more seeped from a rip in her cheek, but otherwise her face appeared untouched. She lowered the pistol, then took a long pull on her canteen. Finally she waved Smocke forward—as if demanding he try shooting her too. Several of his crew members tackled him, and the shot went off into the air.

"I expect my ship to sail in under an hour," Crow said loudly,

“laden with more riches than she should rightly carry.” Her eyes lingered on the other ship’s captain, who still stood near Salay. “If it is not done, I shall visit your fine vessel and teach *each* and *every* one of you what it means to cross Captain Crow. If you doubt my sincerity, ask the crew of the *Oot’s Dream* how much they’re enjoying life at the bottom of the Verdant Sea.”

The captain disappeared into her cabin. Tress slumped on the steps again, trembling, burdened by the terrible sight of those vines bursting from Crow’s body.

What *was* she?

THE EXTRA GOOD LISTENER

"The captain is a gestator for the verdant aether," Dr. Ulaam said, holding up a narrow bottle containing something uncomfortably reminiscent of a kidney floating in solution.

"She just ate *what*?" Tress asked, sitting in his exam room.

"Not just ate. Gestate. It means to incubate. Crow is host to an aggressive strain of the verdant parasite. Your lore calls people like her spore eaters, though I find that an imprecise term. Tell me. Where do spores come from?"

"The moons," Tress said.

"Ah, yes," Ulaam said. "The moons. As food comes from the kitchen, or pottery comes from the Zephyr Islands. There couldn't possibly be another step involved, hmmm? These things just magically appear?"

"So…you mean how do the spores *get* to the moons?"

"Rather," Ulaam said, "what on the moons produces them? Hmmmmm?"

"I…have no idea," Tress said. It was a realization she probably *should* have made before.

Ulaam knelt beside her, holding the kidney up to her side. He shook it, then raised his eyebrow. "Trade?" he asked. "This one will make your urine smell of lilacs."

"Um…no thank you."

“Would you sell one?” Ulaam said.

“Again, no.”

“Selfish,” Ulaam said. “You don’t need two.”

“And how many do *you* have?”

Ulaam grinned. “Touché.”

“To say what?”

“No, it means you have successfully rebutted me.” He stood up, shaking his head. “Regardless, your moons are home to a group of voracious entities known as aethers. Though the true aethers on other worlds have a symbiosis with people, the ones on your moons have become insatiable, aggressive, and fecund.”

“I’m not allowed to say that word,” Tress said.

“No, it means…actually, that word means something very close to what you think it means, but it’s a more polite way of saying it. Anyway, the aethers up above are rampantly self-propagating, and each is connected to a primal element. Vegetation, atmosphere, silicate…

“This alone is dangerous, but your varieties are also highly unstable. The tiniest hint of a catalyst—water, in this case—and they pull Investiture directly from the Spiritual Realm to explosively germinate. It’s a remarkable process.”

Tress considered this, and found herself with a dozen more questions. Once, she might have been too polite to ask them, as he didn’t owe her explanations. But there was something about Ulaam that invited such conversation. Surely that was it, and not that she was changing.

“So…” Tress said, “how did the captain get that thing inside of her?”

“I’ve been unable to find a satisfying answer,” Ulaam said, pulling out a rack full of bottled kidneys, then putting away the one he’d been holding. “Some say it randomly happens to people who fall into the sea, while others claim you have to ingest a very special kind of spore.”

“So she *did* eat it,” Tress said. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Ulaam said, pulling back the sleeve of his suit to reveal a grey-skinned forearm.

With an ear growing out of it.

“You have an ear on your arm!” Tress said.

“Hmmmm? Oh, yes.”

“But…why?”

“Because when I put it on my inner thigh,” Ulaam said, “I kept hearing my clothing brush across it in a most distracting way.”

“Isn’t your head a better location?”

“I already have two there,” Ulaam said. “Did you not notice them? Earregardless, your captain’s affliction is a dire one. She is connected *directly* to the prime verdant aether growing on the moon. It needs water to survive, and the moon has none. So it somehow infects people on the planet.

“The vines inside Captain Crow are exceptionally thirsty, and they constantly drain her of liquid. Somehow, they use that liquid—along with that from other spore eater hosts around the world—to feed the enormous overgrown aether on the moon. I’ve been unable to discover the mechanism.”

“The vines keep her alive though,” Tress said. “They saved her from that bullet.”

“Yes,” Ulaam said. “The aether protects itself by protecting her, but it’s rabid. Insatiable. Incapable of rational thought, it is sucking her dry. The affliction is progressive, taking more and more from its host. I’m told it is exceptionally painful, and it is *always* fatal.”

“Merciful moons,” Tress whispered. “That almost makes me feel sorry for her.”

“Yes, well, most terrible mass murderers like Crow *do* tend to be well acquainted with tragedy. It makes you wonder who the *true* monster is: the killer, or the society that created them?”

Tress nodded.

“That was a trick question,” Ulaam said. “The true monster is the one in that drawer next to you. I gave it seven different faces.”

Tress glanced at the drawer in the small end table beside her seat. It rattled. She pretended not to notice.

“At least now I know why the crew is afraid of her,” Tress said. “They don’t dare mutiny because that thing inside her would protect her from them.”

“Indeed,” Ulaam said. “I have little doubt the captain could kill each and every person on this ship without suffering any ill effects. Other than, you know, no longer having a crew. Temporary immortality does not make one able to trim the sails all by one’s self, as the old adage goes.”

“That’s an old adage?”

“Odd,” Ulaam said. “I meant odd. I think the tongue I’ve been using is wearing out. It used to be able to roll marvelously. Did you

know that ability is genetic? One in four tongues can't manage it." He looked closely at her mouth.

Tress pointedly did not attempt to roll her tongue. Instead she tried to figure out Captain Crow's goals. The woman wanted to push the crew, make them desperate. To sail dangerous waters, because she was dying? And wanted to get in as much living as she could before she went?

"How long," Tress said, "do you suppose Crow has left?"

"Hard to say," Ulaam said. "I hear the malady usually plays out in under a year, but I gather she's had it longer than that. She is lasting remarkably long, but at this point I doubt she has months left. Weeks, maybe days. I've noticed she needs to drink nearly constantly to prevent herself from dehydrating and withering away."

It was another piece of the puzzle. Unfortunately, Tress had no idea how many pieces she needed—or what that puzzle would look like when assembled.

"Was there anything else you wanted?" Ulaam asked. "I have acquired an eighth face, you see, and I think there might be space to graft it on the underside of the thorax."

"What do midnight spores do?" Tress asked.

Ulaam frowned. He quietly rolled down his sleeve, then stepped closer to Tress, leaning over and studying her with one eye. "Hoid!" he called.

The cabin boy wandered in. Tress hadn't realized I'd been outside.

"Did you give Tress midnight spores?" Ulaam asked.

"Nope!" I said.

"Good," Ulaam replied. "I was worried that—"

"I gave them to Weev!" I said, excited. (In my defense, I'd thought them a kind of licorice.)

Ulaam sighed, folding his arms. Tress couldn't help wondering if that squished the ear on his forearm, and what it felt like.

"Tress," the surgeon said, "midnight spores are a very different kind of dangerous from the others. They need a persistent living source of water—in the form of the one who germinates them."

"Like what has happened to the captain?"

"Yes," Ulaam said. "But temporary, in this case."

"But what do they *do*?"

"They create midnight aether," Ulaam said. "Also called Midnight

Essence: a blob of goo that will imitate a nearby object or entity. The aether stays under your control for as long as you sustain it. It is more practical than many of the other spore creations—but also more nefarious. If you practice with it…"

He paused, eyeing her. "*When* you practice with it, have a great deal of water nearby to drink, along with a silver knife. Most sprouters use midnight aether for spying, but be careful of creating a blob larger than about the size of your fist. So, four or five grains maximum. If your creation is too large, it is more likely to escape your control."

"I…barely understood half of what you said, Ulaam," she said.

"Half? Why, I knew you were smart. Your brain—"

"—is not for sale," Tress said.

"Oh!" I said. "You can have mine! It keeps trying to tell me that dirty socks aren't an acceptable strainer for pasta, and if that's true, I do *not* want to think about it."

Ulaam grinned, then plucked a little notebook from the inside pocket of his suit coat and began writing. "I'm recording the most embarrassing ones," he said at Tress's confused glance, "to share with him once he's better. I suspect I can milk this for *decades*."

He did.

"Hoid," Tress said, "I need to find out how to get to the Sorceress. You were there, with her. Can you guide me, or tell me how to cross the Midnight Sea?"

"He's not going to be of any help as long as he's under that curse, Tress," Ulaam said. "You'll need to break it."

"But how?" she asked. "You don't know. Who would?"

My face grew thoughtful. During that time period, normally that would mean I was contemplating whether occasionally biting my cheek technically made me a cannibal. But today I was actually thinking about what Tress was saying.

For once it managed to sink in.

"I can talk," I told her softly, "but I can't *say* anything. I can tell you that you should always wear white to someone else's wedding."

"Which is talking but saying nothing. Nothing relevant, at least, about the curse."

"Right! Now, this is important. You need to find someone who can talk *and* say things."

"That describes a lot of people," Tress said.

It was a struggle. The curse tied my tongue and brain in knots. I

literally couldn't say too much.

"Find…a person…who isn't a…a person," I said. "And can talk… when they…should not."

Tress cocked her head. Ulaam stepped closer. "That was more coherent than anything he's managed in months, Tress. I believe he's saying something important."

"It sounds like gibberish. I think he's toying with me."

"Hmmm. If that's so, then it's remarkably like he used to be. A person who isn't a person? And who can talk when they should not…"

Tress frowned at me, pondering with that blessedly thoughtful mind of hers. Then it clicked. "A talking animal?" she guessed.

I flopped to the ground, letting out a relieved sigh. I was soon lost in thought, trying to decide if cobblers were *also* good at making desserts, or if that was merely a coincidence.

"Ah!" Ulaam said, clapping his hands—then cringing at the sound so close to one of his ears. "That must be it. He's telling you to locate a familiar."

"A what?"

"Powerful users of Investiture—magic, if you prefer—are often associated with talking animals. I've noticed you have similar lore in your world. Is it not so?"

"I suppose," Tress said, thinking back to nursery stories.

"I'll admit," Ulaam said, rolling up his sleeve again and getting out a scalpel, "that on some worlds, my own species is the cause of these rumors. I don't think that is the case here, however, nor do I think they are the result of an Awakener's arts. Likely, the Sorceress and others like her have found ways to Invest common animals to enhance their cognitive abilities."

"Are you even speaking Klisian?" Tress asked.

"Technically yes, though I'm using Connection to translate my thoughts, which are in a language you've never heard of. Regardless, Hoid seems to think you'll be able to find a familiar—a talking animal, if you will. Such an animal would very likely be connected to the Sorceress in some way. Familiars are usually small creatures, used in spying. Birds. The occasional feline…"

"Or a rat," Tress said softly.

"Indeed." Ulaam proceeded to cut the ear off his forearm.

Tress was out the door before he could offer it to her.

She found Huck in her cabin, sitting on the bed, alternating between chewing on a stale crust of bread and reading one of Weev's books: a notebook detailing the use of verdant spores. She'd left it on the bed, and it looked like Huck had nibbled on the corner of the book between bites of crust—though whether that was intentional or due to some ratty instinct, she could not guess.

"You've been lying to me," Tress said, shutting the door.

Huck crouched down, his eyes darting from side to side, seeking the best place to hide.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a familiar?" Tress demanded.

"Uh…" Huck said.

"Were you a companion to the Sorceress? Do you know about her? About how to reach her island? Have you been hiding that all this time?"

"Huh." Huck sat up on his haunches, nose twitching. "I am…yes, I am a familiar, which is why I can talk. How did you find out?"

"Hoid," Tress said, gesturing in the direction of the ship's surgery. "It was difficult for him to speak through the curse, but he gave me enough clues to put it together. Huck, why didn't you *tell me*?"

"I didn't want to lead you into danger," Huck said. "The Sorceress is a horrible person, Tress. You shouldn't want to know anything more about her, and you *definitely* shouldn't be trying to get to her

island."

Tress stalked over to the bed and knelt beside it, at eye level with the rat. "You," she said, "are going to tell me *everything* you know about the Sorceress. Or else."

"Or else what?" he squeaked.

"Or else"—she took a deep breath, nervous, as she'd never made a threat as dire as this in her life—"I will stop talking to you."

"…You won't throw me overboard or something?"

"What?" she asked, horrified. "No! That would be awful!"

"Tress, you make a terrible pirate."

"Please, Huck," she said, "tell me what you know. Can you guide me to the Sorceress's island?"

He considered, then began to speak, but cut off. He rubbed his head with his paw. "No," he said. "I can't, Tress. I'm not what you think I am. I'm…not a familiar. Well, I guess I kind of am, but not in the way you're thinking. My whole family can talk. I grew up on a lonely island far, far from the Sorceress's realm."

"So you're what? A descendant of familiars?"

"A good explanation," he said, then sighed. "If you really want to get to the Sorceress, your best bet *is* to break Hoid's curse. I can't lead you to her. About that, I'm telling you the truth. I promise."

"Can you at least help me break Hoid's curse?"

He thought for a moment. "I… Maybe? I mean, I'm not supposed to talk about this. But so long as it's about Hoid… All right, so here's the problem. The Sorceress's magic forbids a person from talking about the specifics of their curse."

"I knew that already," she said.

"But I've heard—from my family, you see—that one can sometimes get a cursed person to reveal things anyway. The curses aren't alive; they are static, like the rules in a contract. That means, despite how much work the Sorceress puts into them, every curse has holes."

"I don't understand," Tress said, still kneeling beside the bed.

"All right," Huck said, "let's pretend you had a friend who was cursed. If you went to them and said, 'Are you cursed?' they wouldn't be able to say yes. But the fact that they can't is itself kind of a confirmation, you know? So in a way, you've tricked the curse into giving you new information."

"But how does that relate to *undoing* the curse?"

"Every cursed person hears the spell being said, and therefore

knows the method of their salvation. The Sorceress…Tress, she's evil. Sadistic. When she curses someone, she *wants* them to know the path to their freedom, then not be able to tell anyone."

"That sounds horrendous," Tress said, again glancing toward where she'd left Hoid.

"Yeah," Huck said. "I warned you. Look, even *talking* about her is dangerous. You shouldn't keep trying to get to her."

"I'm going," she said. "So I can either go armed with your information, or I can go ignorantly and be more likely to die. Your choice, Huck."

"Ouch. No need to step on the trap after it's already around my neck, Tress. I'm *trying* to help, but there's not a lot I can say. You have to find a way to circumvent the curse. Like…assume you asked that friend, 'How do I undo your curse?' once you know there is a curse. That friend won't be able to tell you.

"But say you told your friend a story about someone else who was cured of their curse, and asked, 'What do you think?' They might be able to talk to you about the story, since it's about someone else—and therefore not about their *specific* situation. You might be able to sneak useful information out."

"That sounds like it would involve a lot of guesswork," Tress said. "And confusion."

"And frustration. And pain. Yeah. But it's all I have for you, Tress. I'm not an expert. I think you should focus on keeping yourself alive, not on this mad quest to visit the Sorceress. Crow has it in for you. I can feel it."

"I thought that at first too," Tress said, letting herself be distracted. She needed time to process what he'd said before pushing him further anyway. "But Crow has turned around. She seems happy to have me on board."

"And that doesn't worry you *more*?" Huck asked.

"Now that you mention it…I should be suspicious, shouldn't I?"

"Sporefalls, yes," Huck said. "I mean, Crow eats bullets, hates everyone, is determined to give her own crew a death sentence. Yet she—casually—has decided she wants you to stay on board. For reasons."

Tress shivered. "We might need you to spy on her again."

"Uh…" Huck wrung his paws a little, then started nibbling on the book again.

"Stop that!"

“Sorry,” he said as she snatched it away. “Chewing makes me feel better. I will spy on her if you want, Tress. But…I mean, I don’t think I’m very good at it. Last time I’m sure they spotted me. That porthole has been kept tightly closed ever since. Plus there’s the cat...”

Tress tapped her finger on the book. The captain was wily, and even Hoid—an obvious idiot (ouch)—had figured out Huck was a familiar. A girl spending time with a rat that seemed too well-trained? Crow probably had her suspicions as well.

But perhaps there was another way. What was it Ulaam had said about midnight spores? They were useful in spying…

She was interrupted by a knock on her door. Tress glanced at Huck, who—with an abundance of caution—grabbed his bread crust in his mouth and hid under the bed. When Tress answered the door, she found Salay standing outside.

“Tress,” the helmswoman said, “we need to talk about who you *really* are.”

30

Salay wanted to know who she really was.

Unfortunately, that was a topic of some confusion to Tress herself. In her youth, she'd *thought* she understood who she was. Now she was sailing with pirates and learning to use *spores*. She found herself demanding answers of Ulaam, and not caring if it was polite.

She wasn't even certain she was Tress anymore, or if she'd become someone else. You could say, in other words, that her state at the moment was *dis*tress.

"Well?" Salay asked.

Tress didn't have a lot of experience with lying, but paradoxically, the ones who are most successful at it are those who don't do it very often. So when Tress remained quiet but stepped back and gestured for Salay to come in, it was exactly the right thing to do.

Salay hesitated. Despite her no-nonsense attitude, she was nervous about entering a sprouter's room. You got used to the idea of silver being around. It let you ignore, to some extent, the spores —like how you can usually ignore your nose always being in view. Or like how people ignore the existential horror that comes from knowing their body is slowly deteriorating every day, time itself marching them toward oblivion to the cadence of their beating

hearts.

However, although Salay might have been short of both stature and temper, she wasn't short on grit. She stepped into the room and shut the door, heroically enduring the chill that ran up her spine and the goosebumps that rose on her arms.

"Would you like some tea?" Tress said, getting out two cups. A charming matched pair of a light pale porcelain with silver on the rims. "It's delightfully lukewarm."

"Er, no," Salay said. "Look, I know you aren't who you're pretending to be."

"I'm just a girl trying not to get tossed overboard."

"Yeah, no," Salay said, folding her arms. "I'm not buying the act any longer, Tress."

This made Tress a little annoyed. "What do you want me to say?" Tress asked, in a rare bout of pique. "I've already admitted that I stole this coat. Other than that I'm an insignificant girl from an insignificant island. There's nothing remarkable about me."

"Oh? An 'unremarkable' girl who just *happens* to be unafraid of spores? Who just *happens* to be made our sprouter after only a couple of days on the crew?"

"I'm terrified of spores!" Tress said, for once not caring if she was being discourteous. "I needed a job on the ship, and this was the only one available!"

Salay leaned forward, studying Tress. "Moon of veils, you're so *good* at this. I don't see a hint of a tell that you're lying."

"Because I'm not lying! Look, if you don't believe me, then what *do* you think I am?"

"A royal inspector," Salay said, "in disguise."

"This," Tress said, gesturing to her inspector's coat, "is a disguise?"

"It's a clever plan, I'll admit," Salay said. "You knew we'd instantly suspect a newcomer. But of course, an inspector would be the *last* person to wear one of those! Except when they're being an inspector. So you knew by wearing it, we'd naturally assume you weren't one."

"That is," Tress said, "an interesting thought process…"

"Yes," Salay said. "I'll admit, I wouldn't have pieced it together if I hadn't discovered that Crow gave you a chance to flee the ship, and you didn't take it."

Oh. "About that," Tress said, "I simply didn't want to abandon

you all. Look, I'm *not* lying. I'm *not* an inspector."

Salay narrowed her eyes. "Yeah? And what about what you did to the cannonballs?"

Tress froze.

"Aha!" Salay said. "You didn't expect me to know about that, did you? I watched Laggart's reaction when that ship didn't sink today. He *wanted* to kill those people, though I haven't figured out why. I *do* know you're the only one who had access to his munitions to sabotage his attempt."

Moon of mercy, Tress thought. *If she figured it out…maybe Laggart and Captain Crow have as well.* She should have known she couldn't fool such an experienced crew.

Tress sat down on her bed, disturbed. Salay was wrong about her, but the helmswoman…she'd stood up to Captain Crow. She'd prevented a massacre. If Tress was going to trust anyone on this ship, she decided, it should be Salay.

"I found out the captain wanted to sink ships," Tress said, "to make you all into deadrunners. She wants you to obey her unfailingly. Even with her powers, she must fear a mutiny."

Salay leaned down, small tight curls of black hair falling around the sides of her face. "A common girl—as you're pretending to be—*figured out* Captain Crow's plot?"

"By accident," Tress said. "Really, Salay. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Let's assume I believe you," Salay said. "And accept that you're not an inspector. Can you *prove* what you said about the captain?"

"There are false bottoms in the gunnery barrels," Tress said. "Laggart keeps sabotaged cannonballs in there. I swapped them for ordinary ones so he couldn't sink any more ships. I have the ones I took out, but I don't know if that will prove anything. It's my word against his."

"I don't need you to confront him about it," Salay said, beginning to pace. "We merely need to get others in the crew to agree to take action. I've organized a meeting with Ann and Fort later tonight. If you brought one of those cannonballs, that might be proof enough for them. They're already suspicious of the captain's motives, and…"

Salay stopped, then walked back to Tress. "And you just manipulated me into telling you about our secret meeting! *Damn* you're good."

Tress sighed.

Salay held her eyes again. “Cold as ice. With a heart of unyielding steel.”

“Really?” Tress asked. “*That’s* what you get from my expression?”

“Indeed,” Salay said. “Behind the fake fear and confusion you’re trying to use to distract me. But I believe you on one thing: you’re no royal inspector.”

“Oh?”

“You’re far too clever for one of them,” Salay said. “You must be a *King’s Mask!*”

Oh. That explained everything. Or, Tress assumed it would, if she knew what on the twelve seas a “King’s Mask” was.

“Everyone knows the King’s Masks *must* lie when asked what they are,” Salay said, putting her hands on her hips. “To protect their secret missions. So I won’t try to get you to confirm it. Will you bring one of those cannonballs tonight?”

“If you think it will persuade the others,” Tress said, “then I will.” She wasn’t certain what any of them could do against someone like Crow, but it would be good to talk about the things she’d discovered.

“Great,” Salay said. “Meeting is in the quartermaster’s room after second evening mess, when night watch is called.” She started toward the door, then hesitated. “Please don’t assassinate anyone before then.”

With that, she was out the door. Tress sat back on her bed, stunned, as Huck emerged.

“So, King’s Mask, eh?” he said. “You sure had me fooled.”

“I—”

“That was a joke,” he said, nibbling on his stale bread crust again. “I’m guessing you don’t even know what they are.”

“Not a clue.”

“Secret assassin group,” Huck said. “Maintained by the king to carry out important missions. Supposedly, there are never more than five at a time. They are the elite of the elite.”

“And she thinks an eighteen-year-old girl happens to be one.”

“The Masks supposedly take youth potions to disguise their ages,” Huck said. “But…it’s possible they don’t really exist, and the king encourages the rumors to make people fear him.

“Don’t blame Salay. People on ships like this one hover at the edges of the law, even when they’re not pirates. Someone like Salay

lives her entire life full of suspicion. She's not dumb; she's just not accustomed to dealing with someone so genuine. It's like you speak an entirely different language."

"I'll need to convince her of the truth," Tress said. "Somehow." She found it physically painful to know someone thought she was an assassin.

"I don't know if I'd go to that meeting, if I were you," Huck said. "Captain Crow is suspicious of Salay and the others. I think she's planning to kill them."

"What? How do you know?"

"When I spied on them for you the other day? I caught a little bit about 'secret meetings' and 'being rid of them finally.' That was before they got to the juicy stuff I told you."

That sounded bad to Tress, but also too vague. She stood up again, pacing through her small quarters, listening to the scrape of spores on the hull outside. "We don't know enough, Huck. We don't know *why* the captain wants to make the others into deadrunners. I mean, she wants to order them to do something dangerous, but why?"

"Yeah," Huck said. "I'm baffled too. Reminds me of a friend of mine. He was a character, I tell you. Once, he was offered cheese—by the way, we don't like cheese as much as people think. Wonder how the rumor started. Anyway—"

"I think," Tress said gently, "we should stay focused, Huck. We need more information about the captain."

Huck dropped his crust. "Okay, I suppose," he said. "I mean, if you really want me to…"

Tress immediately felt guilty, remembering his earlier objections. She had no right to ask him to put his life in danger.

"Never mind," she said, tucking an unruly strand of hair behind her ear. "I think there's another way." She looked in the secret compartment under the bed, then brought out the little box full of midnight spores.

"Tress…" Huck said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm completely out of my element, Huck," she said. "I'm just a girl with a fondness for cups. I have no special training, no special experience. I can't outmaneuver Crow unless I use the resources I have." She held up the box. "My only real advantage seems to be the fact that I'm *slightly* less terrified of spores than everyone else."

"Yeah, but *midnight spores*? Shouldn't we…you know…work our

way up to something like that? You don't *start* by running a full regalthon. You jog a little first."

"A what?"

"Regalthon," he said. "Forty-mile race, held every year on the king's birthday."

"Forty miles?" Tress said, fishing in the various drawers in Weev's cabinet. Hadn't she seen a silver knife in here? "They'd run out of land and fall off the island if they raced that far. Do they go in circles?"

"Oh, Tress," he said, "most islands aren't the size of the Rock, you know."

"Really?" she said. She pulled the knife out of the drawer. "You mean there are some that are *forty miles* wide?"

"And bigger," he said. "I think one over in the Zephyr Sea is sixty miles across."

"Moons!" she said, trying to imagine that much land in one place. Why, in the center, you might not be able to see the sea at all! She shook her head at the crazy thought and pulled out a few waterskins.

After that she knelt by the bed, picked out three black spores, and set them on the mattress. Huck backed away, towing his crust of bread.

She took a deep breath and thought of Charlie. She could do this. For him, and for the people of the *Crow's Song*. Solve the mysteries on this ship, protect the people here, and they would point her in Charlie's direction.

She raised an eyedropper and released a drop onto the spores.

THE MIDNIGHT ESSENCE

I assume you have no idea what a Luhel bond is. Don't feel bad. At this point in the story, I was concerned with trying to figure out how many different shades of orange I could wear at the same time. So we all have our priorities.

Most aether spores—like the verdant spores and the zephyr spores—don't involve any kind of bond. Using them is a simple matter of cause and effect. Compressed aether drops to the planet in the form of spores, and a little water encourages it to grow in an explosive burst.

Midnight spores are different—in fact, they're closer to how the aethers are *supposed* to work. Bringing midnight spores to life creates a temporary bond, a kind of symbiosis between host and aether. Unlike the Nahel bond, which trades in consciousness and anchoring to reality, the Luhel bond trades in physical matter. In this case, water.

Tress felt it as a sudden thirst, a drying of her mouth. She reached for the waterskin, then paused, transfixed by the motions of the spores.

They bubbled and undulated, melting and then enlarging like an inflating balloon. In seconds the puddle of goo—though it had begun as three tiny spores—was as large as a person's fist. There it stopped growing, blessedly, though it continued to writhe and

distort. For a moment a tiny face appeared— stretching out of the black pus. Then it melted back in.

Offer, a thought impressed on Tress's mind. *Trade. Water. Give water.*

Without knowing what she was doing, Tress agreed.

Midnight Essence, in all its different forms, looks for a pattern, a model. It often takes a cue from its creator or host—and in this case Tress glanced at Huck, who had backed all the way across the bed to the far corner, clutching his crust of bread before him like a somewhat-snacked-upon shield.

The Midnight Essence pulsed with purpose, elongating. It formed a black tail. Four paws. A face and snout…a body like a deformed tuber. Soon Tress found herself regarding a small creature that looked *almost* like a rat dipped in black paint. Except the hair seemed more a texture to the skin than individual hairs, and there wasn't enough detail on the toes and the face.

It was too smooth. Jet black and glossy, as if made of tar. Or carved from a tub of lard by a talented artist with no other way to express themself. It scurried back and forth across the bed, trying out its legs—and again, the motions were *almost* ratlike.

Though her thirst was increasing—and strangely, her eyes were beginning to feel dry—Tress couldn't stop watching it. She took a drink—and found herself slurping down the *entire* waterskin. She hadn't thought there would be enough room in her stomach, but once she was refreshed, the Luhel bond strengthened. She'd given it what it wanted, and in so doing gained some measure of control over it. She lost sight of the world around her, her vision fuzzing.

Then she *was* the not-rat. She could direct it, see through its eyes, *smell* what it smelled. She immediately made the thing jump toward Huck, who squeaked and ran under the bed. It was fun for reasons she couldn't explain.

But no, she had *work* to do. Yes, important work that involved scampering across the bed and leaping onto the floor. When she hit, her feet squished into her body, and she had to pop them out again. After that, she scrambled to the door and squeezed under, coming out as goo that oozed back into shape.

Shadows. She *liked* shadows. Down here, in these corridors below-decks, she could move virtually unseen. Even on the steps, the shadows were deep. But up above, the sun was out from behind the moon. Hateful sun, though it was slinking toward the horizon,

drowsy, unaware of her. Midnight Tress crouched on the steps, listening to the footfalls of the people, smelling the old leather of their shoes.

There. A shadow from the mast as the ship turned. She leaped into it, then ran along its length—jumping over the veins of silver in the deck. It would hurt her if she touched it, she knew, but she was stronger in this shape than common spores. Mere proximity wouldn't harm her.

She reached the captain's cabin, which occupied the space directly underneath the quarterdeck. She definitely *shouldn't* have been able to squeeze under that tiny gap between door and deck, but she did. The reinflation took longer this time, but her eyes reformed faster than the rest of her, and she was able to scan the room.

Crow sat at her desk by the porthole, writing something by the waning light of the setting sun. Her hat hung on a peg by the door, her canteen was open next to her, and she wore her jacket unbuttoned.

As soon as her feet were back, Midnight Tress scrambled into the deeper shadows beneath a bench. Crow smelled wrong. Of rotten weeds, and burning flesh, and something else Midnight Tress couldn't identify. The other humans smelled of sweat and sweet flesh. Not Crow. Crow wasn't a person, not entirely. The parasite was winning.

Midnight Tress realized she should have waited. Waited until Crow and Laggart were meeting. She should have planned. But plans…plans were things for people who didn't exist yet. And Tress existed now.

What was that little book Crow was writing in? Midnight Tress inched closer. Could she keep to the shadows enough that she could read the book? She craned her neck, looking up from the floor, trying to see. But the angle was all wrong. Could she…

No. No, she'd have to get right up *beside* Crow to look at the book. She felt excited and eager in this body, but…but even in darkness, she wasn't invisible.

Just a little closer. She could get a little closer.

With effort, Tress held herself back. It was like trying to keep from eating when ravenous. She *wanted* to do what she *wanted*. Didn't she?

No. No…

Crow would leave soon. Evening mess. She'd go like she always did, get food, and then return. Wait.

Wait.

WAIT.

The call went up. Crow shut her book, took a long drink from her canteen, then stood. She took her hat off the peg, went out the door, then locked it behind her.

Now!

Midnight Tress scrambled out of the shadows. She climbed up the table leg with claws too sharp for her otherwise soft and malleable body. Then she sprang onto the top of the table, so eager to reach the book that her feet twisted and distorted as she ran, extra nubs of more legs growing like tumors at her sides.

She reached the book and bit it, pulling it open to the page that Crow had left marked. And inside was…words?

Words that smelled of dust. Dusty, dirty, boring, stupid, melty, inky words. Why words? Why had she been so eager?

Words. Read the words.

She didn't want to, but she did anyway, growing her eyes larger until they bulged from her face—taking in more, making the details more distinct. Many of the words looked printed by some device. But written in the margins, in what she assumed was Crow's handwriting, were notes.

A way to be rid of them, finally? the note said. *A way to banish the spores from my blood?*

Curious. Midnight Tress focused on the text.

> It is clearly evident that Xisis has the power to cure any disease. In 1104, a supplicant reported being healed of cancerous tumors in a very extreme state of progression. This individual, Delph of the Zephyr Islands, is a well-known and respected scholar—and his word is trustworthy.
>
> We have another extreme example. In 1123, Queen Bek the Fifteenth was cured of her spore gestation, and remains the only person—in thousands of years of recorded history—to survive such an infestation. Xisis was involved.

Stupid words. Stupid sawdust-in-the-eyes words. Why? She should find something to bite, something that bled warmth and liquid salt.

She fought with herself, writhing, her shape bubbling and squirming. She almost ripped herself apart in her anger. But she won, finally, and forced herself into the ragged rat shape. She bit pages, moving back through the book. She passed other notes from Crow, but most didn't draw her attention—until she saw two words that stuck in her mind from what Huck had said earlier.

Secret meetings with Weev indicated there should be a way to find the proper location. Too bad he turned to blackmail. Ah well. At least he showed some spine before I killed him.

That didn't explain what Xisis was. She flipped through more pages to find the start of the chapter. What was this thing that could cure diseases? An herb? A potion?

No, a being.

> Xisisrefliel lives beneath the spores in a palace that somehow exists on the bottom of the Crimson Sea. Though his age is unknown, he has lived in that same spot for at least three hundred years.
>
> Many would, very rationally, call him a myth. However, this chapter will establish that he is undoubtedly real, as evidenced by the testimonies of trustworthy supplicants. Granted, traveling the Crimson Sea is not for the faint of heart. Indeed, there are many who would call into question the sanity of any who sail those spores. This has repeatedly been the reasoning for dismissing testimonies of the dragon's existence.
>
> My own efforts to locate the dragon have so far failed, but I can prove it wasn't insanity that led them to their course, but desperation. Their words are trustworthy. Unbelievable though it may seem, Xisis the dragon is real.

The dragon.

Crow thought the dragon was real.

And she wanted to force her crew to sail the Crimson Sea to find the dragon and heal her affliction.

It was the first thing she'd discovered about Crow that made perfect sense. Midnight Tress needed to know more. How did one find the dragon? She'd heard he granted wishes— everyone had heard those stories—but surely there was more to it. Was locating the dragon enough, or did you have to pay him?

But no. Words were splinters for the eyes. Stupid, useless,

bloodless, saltless, flavorless, screamless words were over. No more.

The fight began again and her form disintegrated. Mush on the desk, slapping itself and writhing.

Footsteps.

Fighting against the one who wanted words and the not of the will of being again the words.

Footsteps *outside*.

No no no no no no no no obey.

Crow was returning. Key in the lock.

Had to—

In a flash and a burst of black smoke, Tress was cast out into her own body. She found her mouth parched, dry like it was full of sand. She couldn't recognize the feel of her own *tongue*, now like a lump of cloth, and her hands were *withered* before her. She had collapsed sideways on the bed, and when she tried to speak she let out only a croak.

"Tress!" Huck said, squatting before her face. "Tress!" He held the silver knife awkwardly in his paws. "There was a line of darkness coming out of your mouth. I didn't know what to do, but you were coughing and…"

"Water," she managed to force out. She reached toward the second waterskin.

Huck scrambled over and grabbed it in his teeth, pulling it toward her. She managed to dump it into her mouth. As soon as it touched her tongue, her mouth *burned*. She kept drinking through the pain, choking on the water, forcing it down a throat that was dry as parchment.

After that she lay on the wet mattress, wheezing. If she had been that dehydrated normally, she would undoubtedly have died, but this was no normal effect. Timely application of liquid reversed the process, reinflating her twig arms as the burning in her mouth and throat faded.

She slumped back, enjoying the sensation of *not* being in pain, and thought about what she'd learned. That led her to worry. Would Crow find remnants of the midnight spores? As Tress had broken free from the bond, she *thought* she'd felt her body evaporating into black smoke. Had that left residue?

"Tress?" Huck asked. "Are…you all right?"

"Yes," she said, her voice hoarse. She pushed her hair away from her face, as it had escaped its tail in her thrashing. "You might have

saved my life, Huck. Thank you."

"Well, I guess we're even now," he said. "I'd be at the bottom of the Verdant Sea if you hadn't let me out of that cage."

He was still wringing his paws, so Tress forced herself to sit up and show him a smile. But moon of menace, she could feel a monster of a headache coming on. Perhaps she'd be better off leaving midnight spores alone in the future.

Nevertheless, she knew what Captain Crow wanted. And—though she couldn't be certain—it seemed the things that Huck had overheard *hadn't* been about Salay and the others. The "secret meetings" had been with Weev, and "getting rid of them" referred to the spores in her blood.

Perhaps Salay, Ann, and Fort would know what to do. Tress waited to see if Crow would come barreling in, furious about being spied upon. When that didn't happen, Tress took a luxurious bath, then dressed and prepared to attend the secret meeting. Hopefully the others wouldn't be *too* angry at her when they found out she wasn't a King's Mask.

Tress, of course, underestimated the human mind's ability to believe whatever the hell it wants.

THE LIBERATOR

"I've found a way for us to escape our predicament," Salay said, then gestured at Tress. "Behold our liberator."

Tress froze, her hand still on the door to the quartermaster's office, which she'd just shut. She hadn't expected to be put on the spot the moment she stepped in. "Um…" she began.

"She can't confirm it, of course," Salay said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "But I'm confident she is a King's Mask."

Fort held up his sign. **Not to be a contrarian, Salay, but I sincerely doubt that's the case.**

"Yeah," Ann said. "I'm with him. Tress is great and all, but she's obviously a girl from a backwater island."

"The entire *point* of the King's Masks is that they seem innocent," Salay said. "How many girls from backwater islands have *you* seen walk on the sea? Then cling to the outside of a ship at sail?"

Fort and Ann studied her, and Tress blushed beneath their scrutiny. "I was desperate," she said. "I just did what I had to in order to survive."

It IS a little suspicious, Fort wrote, **how you almost immediately ended up as ship's sprouter.**

"Right?" Salay said. "She's not afraid of spores."

"I'm *very* afraid of spores," Tress corrected.

"And she could have fled the ship at Shimmerbay," Salay said,

“but chose to remain so she could keep an eye on Crow. She admitted as much to me earlier.”

Tress sighed. “I…don’t want to impose, Salay. But I think you’re misinterpreting what I said.”

“Wait,” Ann said. “Salay, you’re acting like this is a *good* thing. If she *were* a King’s Mask, then she’d kill us all. We’re outlaws now.”

“Ah,” Salay said, holding up a finger. “But she *knows* we aren’t complicit in killing anyone.”

Technically, we are, Fort wrote, looking morose. **We turned pirate, then people died. Doesn’t matter that we didn’t shoot the cannon. We’re responsible for those poor people’s deaths.**

The small room grew quiet. Fort sat on his stool behind the counter, shoulders wide enough that they nearly touched both walls at once. He wore suspenders, as the last seven belts he'd tried to wear had given up on the spot—and I have it on good authority he’s been ordered by judicial mandate to stay at least thirty feet from any others as a judgment for past brutality.

Ann sat on the counter by the wall, swinging her legs. She seemed intensely interested in a knot in the floorboards, but in reality she was haunted by Fort’s words. They were all culpable. Everyone except Tress.

Salay stepped toward the others, away from the door. “See, that’s why it’s important that she *is* a Mask. The only way for us to survive after being named deadrunners is to have an agent of the king vouch for us.” She looked to Tress, pleading in her eyes. “That’s why she could be our liberator. She could tell the king we meant well. That we tried to stop Crow. It’s a way out. Isn’t it?”

Tress had seen Salay as stern, straightforward. Like a firm handshake in human form. But right now, there was fear in her dark eyes. And pain. Moon of mercy, it was difficult to hear her plea and deny it.

Fort and Ann both looked to Tress, a spark of hope in their eyes as well.

Huck was right. These people weren’t fools. They weren’t idiots for hoping Tress was something more than the girl she appeared to be. They simply wanted there to be a chance.

Tress’s mouth went dry again, though not from abusing aethers this time. There *was* a way for her to prove she wasn’t a Mask. She merely had to say she *was* one. Incongruently, this would prove she wasn’t one, assuming Salay was right and Masks weren’t allowed to

admit to their station.

But saying that would stomp out their last light of hope. Doing so felt…cruel. Like kicking a kitten.

No. Like strapping dynamite to a kitten, then seeing how high you could get the head to fly.

Tress couldn't say it. They wanted it so much. She in turn was desperate for them to *get* what they wanted. So instead she changed the subject. She reached into her satchel and took out a cannonball.

"I took this," she said, "from a secret compartment in one of Laggart's gunnery barrels."

Salay looked to the other two and pointedly folded her arms, as if to say, *See?*

Fort took the cannonball and balanced it in his palm, his curled fingers against it and the other knuckles holding it steady. He rolled it from one palm to the other, then set it on the counter. He got out a chisel and a hammer, holding them each in his unique way, and gingerly tapped the cannonball in a few specific places. He was then able to hold it down with one palm and twist so the two halves came apart.

Inside, normally one would have found an explosive charge of zephyr spores and the fuse system to burst the cannonball. (We'll get to the specifics later.) Each ball had a number printed on the outside, the seconds until the secondary detonation—which would launch out a spray of water.

In this case, the charge had been replaced by a wadded cloth, the water in the hollow center filled with lead shot.

"Rigged," Ann said, "to sink a ship, not capture it. Moon of justice, Salay. You're right. The cap'n made us deadrunners on *purpose*!"

I knew something was off about all this, Fort said, holding up his sign. **You knew it too, Ann.**

"Yeah, but to see it…" Ann said. "How'd you get this without getting caught, Tress?"

"It wasn't hard," she said. "Nobody wants to go near the charges."

"But how did you even *find* them?" Ann asked, poking at the dissected cannonball.

"I, um, have experience with barrels and hidden compartments."

Salay gave her a sly glance and a knowing smile.

My question is WHY? Fort wrote. **What does the captain gain**

by this? We were already pirates. Killing people instead of looting them makes no sense.

"Yeah," Salay said. "That's the conundrum."

Tress hesitated, then sighed. She had to tell them. "I overheard the captain speaking to Laggart. She was afraid that unless you were wanted criminals—facing death on any island where you tried to flee—you wouldn't be loyal enough."

"Well, she's right about that," Ann said. "Until that ship sank, I was thinkin' about findin' a way off."

You "overheard" the captain speaking to Laggart? Fort wrote. **How? They never speak their secrets out in the open.**

"They weren't out in the open," Tress said. "They were in her cabin." All three looked at her, and she realized her mistake. Moon of mercy. She shouldn't have come to this meeting with a splitting headache.

"You were able to spy on the cap'n," Ann said, "*in* her cabin while she was speaking conspiratorially to her first officer about her secret plans to betray her crew?"

"Er. Yes."

The words hung in the air for a moment before Ann plucked them and chowed down. "Awfully good at espionage for a girl from a backwater island, aren't you?"

"Just lucky," Tress said, then tried to move on quickly. "Look, I'm worried the captain will try to sink more ships. Swapping the cannonballs helped prevent more deaths today, but I think she wants to murder at least one more crew to get you all on board. I mean, metaphorically on board. With her plan. Since, you know." She gestured to the ship.

"I agree with the Mask," Salay said. "Today was too close. We've got enough blood on our hands. We need to find a way to deal with Crow permanently."

That could take time, Fort wrote. **First, I think we should find a way to quench her bloodthirst.**

"She's not exactly the quenchable type," Ann said, "if you haven't noticed. I think we just need to get her away from where she can do damage."

What if, Fort wrote, **we were to persuade her to sail a different sea? One without so many people on it. That way we'd run into fewer innocents she could hurt.**

"True," Salay said, "but we'd have to get to the Crimson Sea or—

worse—the Midnight Sea. But there's no way we'd persuade the captain to do that. She wants to be where the ships are plentiful."

"Actually," Tress said, "I'm pretty sure she'd agree to sail the Crimson Sea."

"Nah," Ann said. "The cap'n's got too healthy a sense of self-preservation. We'd never persuade her…" She trailed off, looking at Tress, and narrowed her eyes. "At least, no *normal* crewmember could persuade her of such a crazy idea."

"I think it will be easy," Tress said, uncomfortable. "Salay, you should suggest it."

"After what I did earlier?" Salay said. "Captain *wants* an excuse to hang me right now. If I asked her to sail the Crimson, she'd toss me overboard for sure."

"Do you really think you can convince her, Tress?" Ann asked.

Now, Tress *wanted* to tell them about what she'd learned: that Crow planned to sail the Crimson and get herself cured. And…it occurred to her that if the captain got healed, everyone would win. The crew wouldn't have to be afraid of a spore eater, Crow would live, and maybe they could all stop being pirates somehow.

But if Tress were to explain how she knew what she knew, she was *certain* the others would be convinced she was a King's Mask. Overhearing the captain was one thing. But admitting to having somehow stolen her private writings?

So, instead of explaining, Tress nodded. "I'll do it. I'm certain I can make her agree to sail the Crimson. The rest of you can focus on the long-term plan: a way to take the ship back from her."

So long as those spores are in her blood, Fort wrote, **she'll be immune to anything we could do to her.**

"Um, pretend she won't have those anymore," Tress said. "Assume her powers will be negated in the near future. By…um… something *completely* unrelated to me."

All three of them took another opportunity to stare at her.

"Right, right," Salay said, ushering Tress out the door. "We'll do that. You get her to sail the Crimson. If she agrees to it, I'm confident I can get the Dougs to go along with the idea too. Most of them are as upset at the killings as we are." Then, in a whispered tone, Salay added, "Just remember our deal. Put in a good word for us with the king. Convince him we didn't want any of this and tell him we helped you stop her. All right?"

"Salay," Tress said. "I'm really not—"

“I know,” Salay said. “You can’t admit it. How about this. If you *happen* to *have* a chance to speak to the king on our behalf, can you promise me you’ll take it?”

“I suppose,” Tress said.

“Good enough,” Salay said. “And good luck.”

THE LIAR

Tress found the captain on the top deck, leaning against the rail at the bow of the ship as she poured water from her canteen into a nice tin cup and gazed toward the setting sun that seared the horizon. Tress stepped up, and at that moment the seethe stopped. Doug, the night helmsman, called for the furling of the sails, and the ship scraped to a halt. It was a quiet beast, slumbering to the gentle sounds of wind on spore and canvas.

Each time the ship stopped, the world felt suddenly out of step with its own music. There was no motion to compensate for, and the air was too quiet. The gentle grinding of spores was normally so constant that its lack became unnatural. Even the deck grew quiet as the Dougs went below to grab a snack and play cards until the seethe returned.

The captain didn't acknowledge Tress. She drank the water from her cup, then dangled it from her index finger, staring toward the sun. As if she were a celestial executioner, sent to make certain the day rightly expired.

Tress didn't speak up immediately. The captain had made it clear she wasn't to be interrupted when enjoying a drink. Tress just hoped the woman wouldn't toss the cup into the ocean when she was done. Yes, it was utilitarian in design, but so was Tress herself. She'd hate to have either be wasted.

The Verdant Moon watched overhead, covering a good third of the sky. I've often found it odd how little the people of the spore seas look at their moons. When I first arrived on the planet, I couldn't help staring. There is a malevolence to the way they hover so close. Where most planetary moons stick to the walls and wait for an invitation to dance, these are already on the floor—and they are wearing sequins.

"Why are you here, Tress?" Crow finally asked.

Tress deliberated. If she outright *asked* Crow to go to the Crimson Sea, the woman would undoubtedly be suspicious.

"Well," Tress said. "I wanted to discuss something."

"That's not what I meant," Crow said. "I want to know why you are here on these oceans. What do you want?"

As if *that* were a simple question to answer. People generally don't *know* what they want, though they almost uniformly hate being told what it should be. Plus, Tress had lived her entire life feeling she shouldn't ask for the things she wanted.

"I left my island to see the world," she said.

"People often say that about becoming a sailor," Crow said. "It's a pretty little aphorism, isn't it? With a dainty bow. Travel the seas, see a hundred different islands. Problem is, each dockside bar is frighteningly similar—and that's basically all you're going to see."

"At least I'll get to meet a lot of different people."

"Well, yes," she noted. "That is true. Problem is, their insides also all look frighteningly similar. And as a deadrunner, that's basically all you're going to see of *them*."

Tress glanced away from Crow. She wished the ship would move again. All this standing still made her nauseous.

"So that's it?" Crow said. "Just some childish desire to be someplace else?"

"Yes," Tress said.

The captain seemed disappointed. In the distance, the sun finally sank into the sea, fully extinguished. Only the afterglow persisted to give evidence of the crime.

It bothered Tress how much she'd had to lie lately. Certainly, one shouldn't feel bad about lying to someone like Crow. One shouldn't hit people either, but such social conventions don't apply to the tiger gnawing on your leg.

So Tress wasn't worried about *this* lie. She was more concerned by the general density of lies emerging from her. They were all for

the greater good, yes, but the aforementioned tiger might also believe that said gnawing was for the greater good. Specifically *its* good.

Tress was coming to realize a discomforting fact: people are not separated into simple groups of liars and non-liars. It is often the situation, and one's upbringing or genetics, that makes the lies—and therefore the liars.

"Actually," Tress found herself saying, "there is more. Someone I love was taken by the Sorceress. I intend to travel to her island and confront her to get him back."

Crow nearly dropped the cup. Tress reached out, anxious.

"The Midnight Sea," Crow said. "*You* intend to travel the *Midnight Sea*."

"Well, hopefully not alone," Tress said. "Ideally I'd like to do it in a ship."

Crow laughed, and it was not a cheerful sound. Antagonistic and mocking, it was to ordinary laughter what a guard dog is to a puppy.

"*You?*" Crow repeated. "A straggly-haired washer girl from nowhere? *You're* going… I can't even say it!"

Something in Tress changed at that sound. It didn't quite *snap*, but it certainly bent—and found that it was able to flex far more than it had in the past. She looked Crow in the eyes and said, "I don't think that's fair. I have gotten this far. My mother always told me that the hardest part of any task is getting yourself to start it."

"As someone who has climbed several mountains," Crow said, "I can confidently say your mother is an idiot."

Tress felt herself flush with anger. Some things were uncalled for, even among pirates.

"Who," Crow said, "did you think would *take* you on this impossible mission?"

"Well," Tress said, "I only really know the crew of one ship right now. I was kind of hoping—"

She was interrupted by another bout of laughter. She had expected this one. She'd provoked it on purpose. Because she was growing less and less embarrassed about lying, at least to Crow.

And she had just thought of quite the majestic one.

"What if I found a way to pay you?" Tress said.

Crow laughed so hard she started coughing. Ulaam even came up and peeked about the deck at the sound, as the sole previous time

he'd heard Crow laugh like that was when one of the sailors had managed to spear himself in the crotch with his own boarding hook.

"Even if I wanted to go to the Midnight Sea," Crow said, wiping her eyes, "and even if *you* could pay *me*, the crew would never agree to it."

"You're probably right," Tress said, pretending to think. "I'd have to ease them into it. Send them someplace menacing, but less dangerous at first. What about…the Crimson Sea? I'd need to cross the Crimson to get to the Midnight Sea anyway. So we could go there first."

"They'd never agree to it, girl," Crow said. "This crew is as cowardly as the king himself."

"But say I *could* get them to agree," Tress said. "Would you allow it? Very few ships sail the Crimson, so the ones that do *must* be the richest and most valuable to loot!"

That, it should be noted, made about as much sense as assuming people who live in distant kingdoms must be the most fit, since it takes so long to walk to those places.

Crow shrugged. "If you can persuade them, fine. But they won't agree. Not yet. They're not…desperate enough."

Tress thanked the captain and excused herself. She didn't want to say anything more, and didn't need to. Because the captain had effectively just been played by a straggly-haired washer girl from nowhere.

Again.

THE TOSHER

There's a story from Tress's land that I'm quite fond of telling. You see, in the palace of the king, the lowliest servant is the tosher—the man who goes through the castle's sewage to make certain nothing useful has been lost or discarded.

No one wanted to be the tosher, for obvious odoriferous reasons. Worse, no one listened to the tosher, because wherever he went, people were either too busy moving upwind from him, or they were preoccupied by trying to remember how to get vomit out of carpet. (Soap, vinegar, and warm water.)

The tosher in our story had a great many items to complain about, some related to the lack of fiber in the royal diet. One thing he didn't complain about was his dinner. Each day he got the same thing. A baked potato with lard.

The tosher loved baked potatoes. So much so that he decided to begin asking for a second one at dinner. He was given it, mostly to get him to go away, and then it became a habit. Two potatoes. Each day.

This continued until the lesser servants were instead served something different for dinner: cornbread with lard. And the tosher *hated* cornbread. He waited for the potatoes to return, but they never did.

One day, while doing his daily work—after remarking that

someone must have dyed the punch green again at the latest ball—a thought occurred to him. His life in the palace was miserable, but surely he could do *something* to better his station. He determined to speak to the cook and get potatoes for dinner again.

So the tosher set out on a quest. He found the cook, apologized for making the milk curdle, and made his plea. Potatoes, please. Less cornbread.

The cook was sympathetic, judging by the tears in her eyes. But unfortunately, she couldn't change the menu. She explained that the palace butler set the meal plan; the cook simply made the food.

The tosher went to talk to the butler. He found the man in the middle of a strange activity: trying to see how much handkerchief his nostrils could hold. The tosher presented his problem. The butler seemed sympathetic, judging by the way he was biting his lip. Sadly, he couldn't change the meal plan—because he was allocated supplies by the minister of trade, who no longer provided potatoes.

Well, the minister of trade—it turns out—had dropped her ring into the tosher's domain. The tosher recovered it after some diligent searching, though he did wonder why someone as fancy as the minister of trade ate so much corn. He went to return the ring, and the minister honored the tosher by seeing him in person. Outside. In high winds. While it was raining. During allergy season.

The tosher explained his predicament. The minister of trade was sympathetic, judging by the way she almost fainted as he approached, and she listened to his complaint. However, she could not help him; the *king himself* had mandated that only corn be fed to the servants.

Well, the king wasn't the sort of person you could meet every day. Because he wasn't regular, and it was an every-second-day thing for him. On the proper day, the tosher—umbrella in hand—called up. He knew the king would be able to hear, as the tosher had firsthand, empirical evidence of how good the acoustics were in that particular location.

He asked the king if he would *please* give them potatoes for dinner again. He loved them so much, he always ate two. The king was sympathetic, judging by how he stopped giving the tosher new work for a short time in order to answer.

"I can't," the king said. "The entire potato crop succumbed to pests. Also, look out."

The tosher learned two important lessons that day. First, you don't need to lower your umbrella to talk to someone. Second, no one—not even the king—had the power to provide potatoes at the moment.

"You're the one," the king said after doing his business, "who started the two potatoes thing, eh?"

"Um…yes?" the tosher called up, then regretted opening his mouth.

"Funny," the king explained, his voice echoing, "I had to stop buying potatoes even before the crop died. Once *you* took two, *everyone* wanted two. Because of the increased demand, potatoes became too expensive. We stopped being able to afford them for servants."

So in truth, there was a third lesson.

Even small actions have consequences. And while we can often choose our actions, we rarely get to choose our consequences.

As Tress walked belowdecks, she felt a certain…discomfort. That was a common occurrence. Conversations with Captain Crow tended to leave a person with residual filth. Emotional soap scum.

As Tress saw Ulaam walking away—disappointed that the laughter hadn't been due to any impaled crotches—she hastened after him.

"Doctor," she said, "there's something I wanted to ask you. About…the spores I most certainly did *not* try."

"Hush," he said, looking down the corridor. He ushered her toward her room. Once inside, he inspected her closely. "Yes…I believe you're still alive."

"I mean, I'm talking to you. And walking around."

"That's not as concrete a set of evidences as you might assume," he said. "But what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Do midnight spores…leave any kind of trace after the bond is broken?" she asked. "Like, say you were using them to sneak into someplace you shouldn't be."

"That is, generally, where people sneak. Hmmmm?"

"Right. But let's say that, um, you were interrupted and someone broke the spell for you so you didn't die."

"It's not a spell, but a complex symbiotic relationship between two entities. Either way, I'd buy the person who saved you a very nice present. Perhaps a spare shoulder."

"Uh…"

“People can always use more shoulders. You know, despite people promising me cold ones as gifts on three separate occasions, they’ve never come through? Humans can be so inscrutable.”

“Right. Uh, back on topic? Please?”

Ulaam smiled, fingers laced before him. Strange, how his grey skin and red eyes could seem so…quaint once you got to know him. Less demonic. More eccentric. “You won’t be discovered,” he said, “unless someone actively *saw* the Midnight Essence moving about while you were controlling it. Once the bond breaks, it evaporates into black smoke, which disperses quickly. No residue is left behind.”

Tress nodded, relieved.

“Why are you so anxious about this?” Ulaam asked.

“Well, I just had a conversation with the captain,” Tress said. “I feel like I got the better of her. And so…”

“And so you wisely assume that maybe instead she was secretly manipulating you. Perhaps because she had a clue as to what you were doing, hmmmm? Curious. What, tell me, did you get her to do?”

“Sail us to the Crimson Sea,” Tress said. “I know what you’re going to say. But I also talked to Fort, Salay, and Ann. They’re willing to sail the Crimson too, and think they can make the Dougs agree.”

“I don’t doubt they can,” Ulaam said. “The three of them can be very persuasive. But *why* are we sailing the Crimson? What in the world could make you *want* that to happen?”

“Oh!” Tress said. “Right. Well, that’s what I found out when I was spying on the captain. She plans to visit a dragon and make him heal her.”

“Xisis,” Ulaam said. “She plans to bargain with Xisis?”

“Yes, and so I persuaded her to sail the Crimson.”

“Something she already wanted to do?”

“Well, yes, technically. It’s more that I persuaded her without her knowing I was persuading her.”

“To, again, do something she *wanted* to do.”

“It’s complicated. But I worry maybe I’m not as clever as I might have thought I was.”

“That seems self-evident, child,” Ulaam said.

“Well,” she said, sitting down on her bed, “wasn’t it at least a *little* clever? The captain was going to sink at least one more ship.

So getting everyone to go now instead… Everyone wins, right? Assuming we can find the dragon, the captain will get healed. No more ships need be sunk. Maybe once she's no longer dying, Crow will let everyone go. And I…"

Well, she would be on the Crimson Sea—remarkably, halfway to the Midnight Sea. That would put her closer to rescuing Charlie than she had realistically thought she would get.

"Child," Ulaam said, going to one knee beside the bed, "Xisis is a *dragon*. He doesn't offer boons. He offers *trades*."

"For what? Treasure? You mean we have to rob some more ships first?"

"Xisis has no need for lucre, Tress. He wants for only one thing in order to continue his experiments: servants to do his chores. But seeing as he lives underneath the spores, he requires a very *particular* kind of servant."

"Particular…in what way?" Tress asked.

"They can't be afraid of spores," Ulaam said. "That is always the trade. One reasonable boon—a healing would count, I suppose—in exchange for one slave to work for him all their days. The trick is finding him an offering who doesn't panic at being led through a tunnel of spores."

In that awful moment, Tress remembered the captain's eyes when Tress had decided to remain on the ship. When she'd volunteered to become ship's sprouter.

You really aren't afraid of spores, girl? Crow had asked.

Oh, moons… Tress thought.

Outside, the seethe started again. The ship lurched into motion a short time later, and she heard the captain calling new orders. They would head to a port and take on extra stores, since they would very soon be going on a long journey…without ports…

Crow was planning to trade Tress to the dragon. And Tress, in her ignorance, had greatly accelerated the ship toward the event. She might have tricked Crow, but she'd managed to trick herself as well.

She would have no proverbial potatoes. But she certainly was standing in a big pile of the tosher's soil.

PART
5

THE LOVER OF TEA

Tress spent the next three days trying to devise a way to escape. Surely she'd done all that could be expected of her. She'd protected the crew of an entire merchant ship. She'd managed to set the *Crow's Song* on a course toward a safe reconciliation for everyone except herself. Surely her conscience would let her flee now.

The ship would stop at port to take on water before sailing the Crimson, and she *had* to find a way off the ship there. Then she could get on with her real quest, and let the *Song* go without her.

Except…

She sat in her room, leaning on her worktable and looking at the cups Charlie had sent her while traveling. He'd stayed true to her all that time, going so far as to sail to the Midnight Sea because he refused to take the easy path and marry one of the women his father wanted him to. He'd gone to his doom because of…because of love. For her.

Could she really run? Hoid was her best lead in figuring out how to reach the Sorceress. Plus, here on this ship she had a crew that would sail the Crimson. And could she *really* abandon her friends? Particularly when they were showing so much faith in her? If she left, who would the captain give to the dragon? Would Crow be left with no recourse but to return to the Verdant Sea and continue her pillaging, murderous ways?

Questions like these burdened her. Worry has weight, and is an infinitely renewable resource. One might say worries are the only things you can make heavier simply by thinking about them.

The day the *Crow's Song* finally pulled into port, Tress was on the deck, wind making a mess of her mane of hair. Again thinking about Charlie. She missed him a frightening amount. She hadn't realized, in their years together, how much she'd come to rely on his presence.

Not that he'd done anything specific. Charlie wasn't really a "do things" kind of person. He was a "be things" kind of person. Making decisions was easier around him—as if he were an emotional lubricant easing the machinery of the heart as it labored through difficult tasks.

Lately, she'd been having trouble picturing him. She could perfectly remember a picture *of* him, hanging above the mansion's hearth. But him? That wasn't so easy, though she loved him. That is not so odd an occurrence. A picture is an object, easy to define and contain, while a person is a soul—and is therefore neither of those things.

The island appeared up ahead, breaking out of the Verdant. Dougs called out, excited to go ashore. Even Hoid seemed to have a spring in his step as he wandered past wearing…well…

All right, I was wearing black slacks with bright white athletic socks. There. You know my shame. My relationship to fashion was in those days akin to that of a fifteen-pound spiked mace to an unarmored forehead.

Before Tress could decide if she wanted to execute her half-formed plan of escape, Laggart sauntered over and tapped her on the shoulder. He pointed toward the captain's quarters. "Crow wants to see you, girl."

With a sigh, Tress obeyed. Inside, she found Crow at her desk, holding an exquisite porcelain cup with a floral motif painted across the side. The captain sipped at it and waved toward the seat across the small desk.

Tress sat, noticing—but trying not to stare at—the book she'd read earlier. Crow idly tapped it with an index finger as she stared out her porthole.

On deck, Laggart called orders for the Dougs to prepare the ship for docking. The vessel slowed and turned, wooden timbers giving soft groans of exertion.

“That’s…a nice cup, Captain,” Tress finally said, daring to speak first.

“Got it from those merchants,” Crow said. “My first official piece of plunder.”

“We’re pulling into port,” Tress noted, as if it needed to be stated. “I am, um, planning to go ashore…”

“No you aren’t,” Crow said.

“I’m not?”

Crow shook her head and took another sip. “You’ll join me in conversation here while the crew unloads cargo and reloads supplies. I should…enjoy the company.”

A tremor went through Tress, an aftershock to Crow’s words. Was this proof she had discovered Tress’s spying?

Or…no, this might simply be Crow being careful with her chosen offering for the dragon. With a sinking feeling, Tress realized that she wouldn’t get to decide whether or not to flee. Even if Crow didn’t know what Tress was planning, she wasn’t taking any chances.

“Do you like tea, girl?” Crow asked.

“I’m fond of it, yes.”

“You’d probably love this,” Crow said. “Zapriel tea, from the Dromatory Isles. Expensive stuff. Worth more than gold, by weight.”

Notably, she did not offer Tress a cup.

“This is how a deadrunner lives,” Crow continued. “Frenzied bursts of opulence. Best enjoyed quickly, as our lives are bound to be short. It pleases me that the rest of you get to experience this.”

“Being hunted? Being outlaws?”

“Being one step from death,” Crow said. “Most people never *live*, Tress, because they’re afraid of losing the years they have left…years that also will be spent *not* living. The irony of a cautious existence.” She took another sip and eyed Tress. “Do *you* feel more alive now? Now that you have joined us in killing, facing the chance to be killed?”

Tress wanted to answer. Because…she *had* noticed this. She wasn’t so timid about right and wrong, or about propriety, as she once had been. Was…something breaking inside her because of this life?

Could she ever fix it?

“You’re wrong,” Tress said. “Plenty of ordinary people live

meaningful, interesting lives without needing someone like *you* pushing them. You shouldn't be so callous about killing good people."

"I am no more callous than the moons," Crow said. "Why, they take young and old, lovers of virtue or vice. Fallen to disease here, famine there. A casual accident inside the safety of one's home. Why should *I* avoid killing good people? I follow the path of the gods themselves by delivering death indiscriminately. To do otherwise would presume I am greater than they."

"You could have gotten what you wanted without killing."

"Yes, but why?" Crow said. "I'm a pirate. So are you, though you make a terrible one. Too merciful. Looking to protect random merchant ships when you *should* be worried about yourself."

Tress fell silent, her breath catching.

Crow took another sip of her tea. "Yes, I know about the cannonballs," she said. Why beat around the bush when there were so many people who *weren't* currently being beaten? "Laggart hasn't figured it out yet, but he has the intelligence of a walnut. There's only one person who could have swapped those balls."

Tress wished she were more coolheaded, so the sweat on her brow wouldn't give her away.

"Don't look so frightened," Crow said, leaning back in her seat. "That was an enterprising move, if misguided. You'd be an excellent servant—rather, sailor—if you could be properly controlled. Anyway, it's over now. We're sailing the Crimson as you wanted. You really think you can save your friend from the Sorceress?"

"I didn't do it solely for him," Tress said, annoyed at how deeply she allowed Crow's words to sting. "I wanted to protect the crew; I didn't want you truly making them into deadrunners."

The captain laughed. "Protect the crew? By persuading them to sail the Crimson? Child, I worried that killing Weev would deprive me of my favorite source of amusement, but you have well and truly taken his place!"

Tress blushed and looked down. She tried to remember how she'd felt so proud of herself a few days ago—but that emotion seemed remarkably naive now.

"Do you even know?" the captain said. "Do you *realize* what the Crimson Sea is like?"

"I…I know it's bad…"

Crow let out a roar of laughter, loud enough that the moons

themselves assuredly heard. She slapped the table, rattling her tea saucer. “You set us on this course, and you *don’t even know* what we’re sailing toward!”

It occurred to Tress that she absolutely should have asked this question before. “I understand,” Tress said, “that there are more dangerous spores than the verdant ones. But I don’t see how a sea can be *much* more dangerous—we already *are* careful not to spill water, and we have silver all throughout our ship. So as long as we’re careful, we should be fine, right?”

“Oh, girl,” Crow said with a chuckle, “it’s not the spores that are the problem. It’s the rain.”

Right. Rain.

I haven’t explained rain.

The more meteorologically inclined among you might be wondering about the planet’s weather patterns and water cycle. If you’re one of those to whom these things are extremely important, you have my sympathies. It’s never too late to develop a personality. Maybe go to a party. But try to avoid topics like weather patterns and water cycles. Unless of course you can do it like me.

Rain falls in small localized ribbons on Tress’s planet. These vibrant lines of water weave like serpents in the sky. Rain brings death and life, hand in hand—fitting company for the gods.

More isolated squalls than true storms, these resplendent displays are best at night. They shatter the moonlight into a thousand colors. You haven’t witnessed the full grandeur of a rainbow until you’ve watched one explode in rings on the Verdant Sea, haloing a moon big enough to swallow the sky.

Naturally, aethers grow with the rain, springing up behind those ribbons of water. It’s as if some celestial being is drawing lines on a map, and fortifications appear spontaneously at their will. Those walls hang there, gasp for life, then collapse into the sea, devoured by the jealous spores.

It’s beautiful in a way only something so terrifying can inspire, and terrifying in a way that only something so beautiful can demand. Fortunately, these rainfalls are perfectly predictable. They follow the same routes every time, so constant that rainfall maps from a hundred years before are still accurate.

Except in the Crimson Sea.

“Rain falls unpredictably in the Crimson, girl,” Crow said. “Yes,

the spores are dangerous—they create red spines, sharp as a needle. But the *real* danger is the rain. Squalls can come upon you at any time, unexpectedly, weaving through the sky in any direction they please. Sailing the Crimson is all about random luck. No preparation can protect you, because the rain kills the clever same as the fool. Just like I do."

Outside the room, Tress heard thumps as the Dougs began to return with barrels of water. "I…see," Tress said, her mouth dry. "And the Midnight Sea? Is it the same? Random rains?"

"Oh, no," Crow said, standing up and stretching. "But it doesn't matter, seeing as how midnight spores birth monsters that serve the Sorceress. Rain can fall twenty leagues from you, but you'll still get swarmed by the monsters. There's no escaping them—at least on the Crimson you can get lucky. No one sails the Midnight without being attacked." Crow smiled. "No one." She nodded then, dismissing Tress.

The Dougs had returned, and the ship was stocked. There was no opportunity for Tress to flee now.

THE EXPLORER

Crow followed Tress out. It wasn't until the ship was safely away from port—on a heading that would take them straight into the Crimson Sea—that Tress was allowed to go belowdecks.

Trapped. She was trapped on this ship.

They were sailing toward an insane sea where rain fell unpredictably. And if they survived, she would be sold into slavery to a dragon.

Had she really thought she had the upper hand? Had she *really* thought she could rescue Charlie?

Her? Of all people?

The worst part was, he would probably never know what had happened to her. He'd rot alone in the Sorceress's prison. And if by some miracle he *did* get free, he'd find that she'd left the Rock—but her ship had been destroyed by deadrunners.

She drifted down the steps, then down the hallway. Dougs laughed and worked behind her, thumping on the steps to the hold. But she felt alone. Like she was choking at dinner, and nobody could see. Or maybe nobody cared.

She fled to her room as tears threatened to boil free. She doubted that bawling your eyes out was an appropriate pirate activity, so she was glad she was able to get the door shut before she fully lost control.

“Whoa,” Huck said. He scampered up onto the footboard of the bed. “Hey, Tress. What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I…I…” She shook her head and gasped for breath, unable to speak. It was all suddenly too much. People are like stomachs, you know. They can process some of what you feed them, but stuff in too much too fast, and eventually it’s going to come right back up.

“What did they do to you, Tress?” Huck asked. “I’ll get them back. I promise you. I’ll bite ’em on the toes.”

“On…the toes?” she asked through the tears, imagining the ridiculous sight.

“Yup,” he said. “It’s a very noble thing to attempt, as the toes are the third most stinky part on a human’s body. I’d do it anyway, for you.”

Tress settled down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as tears crawled down her cheeks.

“Tress?” Huck said. “Really. What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” she whispered. “And nobody did anything to me. *I’m* to blame. For all of this. The captain plans to trade me to the dragon of the Crimson Sea—I’m to be payment for a healing.

“I knew I was in over my head, so why should I be surprised? Why *wouldn’t* I end up trapped on a ship captained by a demon, sailing straight toward my own doom? It’s what I deserve.”

She put the heels of her palms to her eyes, rubbing them. Then she felt a distinct *bite* on her left big toe.

“Hey!” she said, sitting up and looking toward the foot of the bed, where Huck sat.

“Sorry,” he said. “But I *did* promise to bite the person who was responsible for you crying. Also…um, no offense…but *yuck*.”

She flopped back down. “Don’t make me laugh,” she said. “I might shatter like a cold glass dropped in hot water.”

He scrambled along the bed, up next to the pillow, watching her tears. Those were quieter now, but still persistent, like the pain itself.

“I…went ashore,” Huck said. “I hid in one of the bales of cloth the Dougs hauled out, then made my escape while Fort was selling them. He’s good, by the way. I’ve never seen someone haggle like that man. And beyond that, the town was really interesting. Maybe you’d like to hear about it?”

She shrugged.

“When I’m feeling bad, it’s nice to think about something else,”

Huck said, wringing his paws. “So let me know if I’m helping, or if you want me to be quiet. Sometimes it’s better if people—and rats—are quiet. I know that. At least, someone told me that once.

“Anyway, I watched Fort haggle, but I was too far away to read his words. I just know he got way more for those bales of cloth than he should have, considering the buyer must have known they were hot. Oh! And afterward he went to meet with a group of Deaf people living on the island. There were a bunch of them, and Fort smiled a lot and used his hands to talk, instead of the board. I wonder if the other islands have groups like that and I never noticed.

“Anyway, the city didn’t fly the royal flag. Isn’t that interesting? I know we’re at the border of the Emerald Sea, but still. The king has always made it seem like there *aren’t* any rogue islands. And we just landed on one! I expected a lot of peg legs and eye patches, but the people seemed…normal.”

“We’re pirates now,” Tress said, “and there’s not an eye patch among us. We’re normal too, I guess.”

“Kind of funny to think about, isn’t it?” Huck said. “That all the pirates in the world were once someone normal.” He fell silent, as if uncertain whether he should continue.

Tress, oddly, found that his talking *was* helping. She’d never been one for wanderlust, but she had dreamed of far-off places and their cups. That part of her genuinely wanted to hear about the island.

“You said the town was interesting,” she said, turning to look toward Huck. “Interesting how?”

“Oh!” he said. “They have a *bell tower*, Tress! I’ve always wanted to see a bell tower. I overheard some people talking, and they said it has fifty-three bells. What an odd number, don’t you think? I always thought a bell tower would have one bell. It’s not a *bells* tower.

“Well, I walked all the way around it and snuck a peek through the window, and they have *ropes* for ringing the bells! You pull on them and make sounds all through town. I doubt they’d let rats pull the ropes though. Even if we could.”

Tress smiled. A simple act, but only moments ago it had seemed as impossible as flying. Or as coming up with a rhyme for “bulb.” (No really. Try it.)

There was something endearing about the way Huck continued explaining his experiences on the island. He spoke of the most

common things. A garden with flowers that smelled good. A pathway where all the cobbles fit together to make a spiral. A drinking fountain that you worked with a foot pedal.

The fact that he found these things interesting enough to talk about was in itself engaging. The topic mattered less than his enthusiasm. And so, Tress smiled. That didn't banish her worries or her sorrow, but it did nudge those dour thoughts toward transforming into other less oppressive ones.

"…And then the girl got her brother wet," Huck said, "by stomping on the pedal when he bent down to drink. Isn't that delightful? Reminds me of being young. When I wasn't on a pirate ship far from home."

"You could go back," Tress said. "If you want, Huck. You could leave. You should."

"I can't," he said softly. "I can't ever go back to my island, Tress. Because my home isn't there anymore."

That had the markings of tragedy, so Tress didn't press him for details. Plus, she didn't want to think about the fact that—in all likelihood—she wouldn't ever be going home either.

"Does it seem like things were better when you were younger?" Huck asked. "Did life really make more sense then?"

"Yeah," Tress whispered. "I remember…calm nights, watching the spores fall from the moon. Lukewarm cups of honey tea. The thrill of baking something new."

"I remember not being afraid," Huck said. "I remember waking each day to familiar scents. I remember thinking I understood how my life would go. Same as my parents'. Simple. Maybe not wonderful, but also not terrifying."

"I don't think things were really better though," Tress said softly, still staring at the ceiling. "We just remember it that way because it's comforting."

"And because we couldn't see the troubles," Huck agreed. "Maybe we didn't want to see them. When you're young, there's always someone else to deal with the problems."

Tress nodded. Beyond that, memories have a way of changing on us. Souring or sweetening over time—like a brew we drink, then recreate later by taste, only getting the ingredients *mostly* right. You can't taste a memory without tainting it with who you have become.

That inspires me. We each make our own lore, our own legends,

every day. Our memories are our ballads, and if we tweak them a little with every performance…well, that's all in the name of good drama. The past is boring anyway. We always pretend the ideals and culture of the past have aged like wine, but in truth, the ideas of the past tend to age more like biscuits. They simply get stale.

Tress thought through a few of her personal favorite ballads, which thrummed with honey, and love, and other sweet things.

She genuinely felt better. Moons, hearing about bell towers and water fountains had made her feel *better*. For some people, feeling better would have been an excuse to ignore the situation, but Tress preferred to weaponize her mood swings. So, ever pragmatic, she sat up on the bed and confronted her problems.

"I need a way to defend myself," she whispered. "A way to defeat Crow before she sells me to the dragon."

It was fortunate, then, that Tress's room contained five different varieties of the most dangerous substance on the planet.

THE SCHOLAR

Tress had given her room a cursory inspection when she'd moved in. She'd sorted through the things Weev had left, mostly to make certain nothing truly dangerous was hiding among them. Those earlier explorations had been the actions of a girl playing a role.

Now she looked again. As a girl trying to save her life.

Where she had read, now she studied. Where she had arranged, now she organized. And where she had accepted, now she experimented. Nothing motivates quite like a deadline. Particularly one that emphasizes the *dead* part.

Tress didn't just pour her whole heart into the activity, she gave it her entire body, for a heart can't accomplish much without a nice set of fingers. Weev had not been an orderly person. Tress had hoped he'd left behind manuals of instructions. Instead she found scraps and scrawled notes, cluttered with collected tidbits and half-finished ideas. The sort of mental detritus that those unacquainted with genius often attribute to unfettered brilliance.

In truth, there was no pattern to such a mess other than the subtle chaos of frustration. Signs of a mind stretching beyond its limit toward ideas *just* beyond its reach. This can happen to a dunce as easily as a genius; it's no proof of capacity, any more than a person being too full for dessert is an indication of their weight. In Weev's case, the scraps were indicative of a mental hoarder: a person who collected ideas like a grandmother collects ceramic

pigs.

It was in the middle of realizing this—and coming to understand that she would find no miracle solution—that Tress ran across the first promising scrap. It was a detailed schematic for a cannonball, with a scrawled message at the bottom indicating the captain had wanted Weev to figure out how to make them himself, so the ship wouldn't have to keep buying them at high prices from the zephyr-masters.

This intrigued Tress. She had a casual interest in the mechanics of cannonballs, like the way you might find yourself interested in the cuisine of a culture whose language you'd been learning. What held her attention, however, was the intricate use of spores inside them.

Weev had been stymied. That much she could tell from his scrawled notes, which only served to distort and obfuscate the otherwise orderly diagram. Still, it depicted a sprouting technique she hadn't been aware of.

By now you've seen that a cannonball on Tress's world wasn't merely a lump of metal, but a piece of artillery—one I promised to explain in more detail. You see, each had a timer inside that, after its launch, would lead to a secondary explosion and a burst of water. Yes, you know that part already. But do you know how the timers were made?

It turned out to be quite simple: the timer fuse was a *vine*. From the notes, Tress learned she wasn't the first to discover that applying water to an aether would cause it to continue to grow after its initial burst. The explosive emergence was erratic, but everything afterward was far more predictable. Even precise. An exactly measured verdant vine would grow at an extremely reliable rate when given an exactly measured amount of water.

(Yes, for those of you who care about things like weather patterns, this growth eventually stopped—and a given vine would eventually exhaust all of its growth potential. Otherwise, people couldn't very well eat them. Getting the vines to the end of their growth potential was essential for turning them into emergency food.)

Anyway, the initial explosion that sent the cannonball soaring *also* broke a small glass container of water inside, soaking a clipping of verdant aether. That vine grew—pushing a plug with a bit of silver on the tip—through a short tube toward the central mechanism of the cannonball. This was a charge of zephyr spores

surrounding a hollow sphere made of roseite. That roseite, in turn, had wax on the inside—which allowed it to contain, but not touch, a charge of water.

The silver tip pushed through the zephyr spores, killing a small number of them but leaving most unharmed, and then touched the roseite sphere—which cracked from the pressure of the silver. Water flooded out, touched the zephyr spores, and released their explosion—which detonated the entire mechanism violently, shooting out shrapnel and water.

I have seen the modern designs, a note at the bottom said—she didn't think it was from Weev, but the original creator of the diagram—*and agree. Impact detonation charges are the future of artillery.*

She didn't know what that last part meant, but nonetheless she found the diagram ingenious. Here were three different aethers working together. Verdant for the fuse. Roseite for the water container. Zephyr for the explosion. The central sphere didn't break from the initial firing of the cannonball because it was far, far stronger than glass—but it had a built-in weakness, in that silver could damage it. In this design, she also discovered that wax could insulate an aether from water.

She was in awe, and possible experiments ran through her mind. Now, it should be noted that experimenting with zephyr spores was usually an excellent way to be certain you went home in many small coffins, instead of one large one. But, as we've demonstrated previously, Tress possessed a common sense rare to many in her position.

The sprouter profession attracts a self-selecting crowd. Normally this includes uncommon individuals who have somehow survived their natural inclination to jump from idiotic heights into shallow water, or to ride bicycles down mountainsides, or to eat unidentified brightly colored berries.

The human species does need a certain amount of foolhardiness. Without that, people would have been too reasonable to do frightening things—like venture close to that very hot orange stuff that turns wood black and makes Tharg's beard smoke. But evolution is not a precise mechanism, and it has resulted in a certain number of people in the population with more nerve than neurons. Spore sprouting was only the latest in an increasingly shiny set of activities destined to neatly—and violently—cull such

individuals from the gene pool.

But Tress hadn't sought out the occupation. She'd fallen into it. She was intelligent enough to understand the charts and thoughtful enough to expand upon the ideas. And what she lacked in formal training, she more than made up for by being the type of person who used oven mitts even when a pot had been given time to cool down.

It was, at that moment, the exact mix that innovation required. In fact, while some might call what happened next dumb luck, I would term it inevitable.

There's no reason, Tress thought, holding up the schematic, *why you couldn't make something like this that was portable.*

Not just a gun. Guns were common, and while useful, not particularly flexible. Could she improve upon that? What would a modular *spore gun* look like?

A note at the bottom of the schematic—again added by the original creator—gave her the last piece she needed.

Reference my schematic for flares, which iterates on this design.

Moon of meanings… Flare guns. The first few steps had already been taken. All Tress had to do was—

A knock came at the door.

Such a little interruption. A polite one, of the type Tress associated with her old life. Nonetheless it shattered Tress's concentration like the thunder of a thousand cannons firing at once. She leaped to her feet and threw open the door, uncharacteristically prepared to unleash a stream of verbal abuse upon the one who had so callously interrupted her.

She found Fort standing outside, plugging the hallway, holding a plate covered with a pot lid to keep it warm. He held up his sign.

You didn't pick up evening mess, it said. **Are you all right?**

Tress blinked, then glanced out her room's porthole. It had gotten so dark, she'd been squinting to read without realizing it. Soon, she'd need to light her lamp—a luxury afforded the sprouter that was denied common sailors. She put a hand to her head, pushing back her hair, trying to track the hours. Had she really been *that* enthralled?

Moon of mercy…she'd been ready to snap at Fort when he'd been so kind as to bring her some dinner. What had happened to her? Had some kind of spell on those papers made the time vanish? Or had she really been *that* interested? Remarkable. There weren't any

cups involved, nor any windows.

"Thank you, Fort," she said, taking the plate. She peeked underneath the cover and found the normal crusted slop leftovers. Today's offering *might* have once been some mashed potatoes and seagull, though it was difficult to tell through the char. She figured the meals probably *weren't* made of sawdust and rocks, despite the flavor, since she hadn't died from malnutrition yet.

You still owe me for all this, he noted. **Captain never did order me to let you eat, despite your new station.**

"When we figure out the right payment," Tress mumbled, "can we maybe start letting me have some that *isn't* scraped off the bottom of the pot?"

Fort frowned. **What? Tress, I save some for you and Hoid first thing, before I let the Dougs at it.**

"You…what?"

It hit her like a hammer to the skull.

This wasn't the leftovers.

This was what *everyone* ate.

"Oh…oh *dear*," she said.

Fort had the decency to look down and shrug apologetically. **We took turns after Weev died,** he wrote. **I'm the best we have. Ann's concoction left half the crew sick for three days.**

"Is that so," Tress said. "Well, I think I have discovered a way I can repay you—and the rest of the crew—for the kindness you've shown me."

Cooking here isn't easy, he warned, holding up his palm beside the board after he wrote the words. **We only have sea rations—most of it stale, canned, or dried. It's hard to make palatable.**

"I think you'll be surprised," Tress said. "Come get me tomorrow before you start cooking for evening mess…" She trailed off as she heard the bell on deck ring out a warning.

That wasn't the three heavy strikes indicating another ship had been spotted. But neither was it the call to mess, which was a constant ringing. It was two strikes, then quiet, then two strikes.

"What's that?" she asked.

Border ahead, Fort wrote, hand moving quickly as he practically bounced with excitement. **Crimson Sea has been spotted. Want to witness the crossing?**

"Absolutely!" she said, joining him in the hall, though she was strangely reluctant to leave her research. That was silly. She had no

formal training in academics; her schooling had ended at basic reading and arithmetic. Surely *she* wasn't secretly a scholar. A window-washing girl? If she'd been inclined toward research, she'd have realized it before.

The truth was, she'd simply never encountered a topic interesting enough—or dangerous enough—to engage her.

THE APPRENTICE

I'm not sure I can recommend visiting the spore seas. While there are places in the cosmere that are more deadly, few are so casually dangerous. Other locations will kill you with a roar or a cataclysm. But the spores, they do it with a whisper. One moment you're enjoying a nice book. The next, you take in an unfortunate breath, get a few crimson spores in your system, and suddenly you've turned your skull into a colander.

It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it seems somehow more unfair than dying from a lightning bolt or a hurricane. Nature is *supposed* to announce herself before murdering you. It's only sporting.

That said, the spore seas *do* have some sights to sell.

Fort made room for Tress by the prow, sending a couple of Dougs to watch from the rigging instead. It was evening, and this far away from the lunagree the green dome of the Verdant Moon drooped low on the horizon behind them—a mirror image to the Crimson one ahead. A vast red sphere in the sky, peeking over the horizon, with the sun hovering above it like an eager sibling.

Closer to the ship, just ahead, the verdant spores gradually mixed with the crimson, making a gradient where—from a distance—the center was a deep brown. The vibrant, shimmering red beyond seemed an ocean of blood, like the Crimson Moon had been shot

and the *Crow's Song* was sailing toward its corpse.

Tress hadn't given thought to how *wrong* that color would feel. The Emerald Moon and Sea had, quite literally, colored everything she'd ever seen. It intimidated her to realize she was leaving it and entering that wounded red ocean instead. She'd been watched by the Verdant Moon all her life, and a very small piece of her—irrational though it was—worried she'd vanish the moment it stopped thinking about her.

As they closed the distance, then crossed the border, Fort leaned against the railing and held up his sign. **You're grinning.**

"Sorry," Tress said. "It's just that this is *terrifying*."

You smile when things are terrifying?

"I didn't use to," she said. "I think my brain is intimidated by how insane things are out here on the seas, and is trying to fit in."

Fort rubbed his chin, but didn't write anything else. She knew he was thinking about her supposed role as a King's Mask, and how she wasn't nearly as frightened of spores as she should have been. And again, it *wasn't* that. She *was* afraid.

At the same time, she hadn't realized how terribly beautiful those red spores would be. Nor how strange it would feel to be leaving the Emerald Sea. These were new emotions, and like new flavors, they could be simultaneously terrifying and intoxicating.

What else would she have never known about herself, if she hadn't left her home island? Worse, how many people like her lived in ignorance, lacking the experience to fully explore their own existence? It is one of the most bitter ironies I've ever had to accept: there are, unquestionably, musical geniuses of incomparable talent who died as street sweepers because they never had the chance to pick up an instrument.

The *Crow's Song* continued straight on into the Crimson Sea until one of the Dougs in the rigging called out a warning. The sky had opened up, and death was snaking toward them.

Tress had never seen rain before. On her island, water came from wells. Though she'd been told about water falling from the sky, it had always felt magical, mystical. A thing of stories.

One of those stories apparently wanted to eat her, for the rain came streaking straight toward them: a knot of fast-moving clouds in the sky, trailing an explosion of aether in a line upon the ocean. A vast wall of crimson spikes that grew up and locked together with such force, the clacking sound was audible from a great distance.

Tress stood, mesmerized. Salay, fortunately, had more experience here—and was already turning the ship when the captain called out an order to do so. They veered hard, tacking to port and swerving—lethargically—back into the Verdant.

The rainline didn't give chase, though it did turn upon the border of the seas, racing on ahead, leaving interlocking crimson spines thirty feet tall. Those eventually slumped and sank into the sea, leaving it pristine, calm. Like a child who stuffed the broken cookie jar under the counter and assumed all would be forgotten.

"Moons," Tress breathed. "What if…what if the seethe had stilled right then? What if we'd been unable to move…"

Fort glanced at his board to read what she'd said. His only response was to shrug. It was the sort of risk they would take, sailing the Crimson.

Tress turned toward the quarterdeck, where Crow stood near the helm station, taking a long pull on her canteen. She lowered it, and seemed thoughtful.

She wouldn't dare press forward, would she? With that rainline slithering through the region?

"Helmswoman," Crow finally said, projecting her voice so everyone could hear. "Kindly take us south a spell, along the border. It seems…imprudent to enter the Crimson at the moment."

"As you command, Captain," Salay said.

Crow swooped down to the main deck, then slammed herself into her cabin. Laggart hurried down the steps, nearly stumbling in his haste, then quickly covered the slip by shouting for the Dougs to get back to work. In minutes, they were sailing a leisurely course along the border. Fort excused himself to go scrub some pots, leaving Tress leaning against the ship's rail.

Laggart stomped past Tress, then hesitated. "You," he said. "What do you think of this *now*?"

"I honestly don't know," she replied. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it all."

"I can help with that!" Dr. Ulaam's voice called from nearby.

Laggart grunted. Then he gestured for her to follow. Curious, she joined him on the quarterdeck. Behind the helm and the captain's roost was the aft cannon, set out on its own railed platform, like a heavily reinforced balcony sticking out the very back of the vessel.

It was a dangerous section of the ship, as it was away from the silver protections. Spores that somehow leaped the gap between sea

and deck here would take longer to die. That, of course, was important for the zephyr spores used as charges.

Laggart rummaged in the gunnery barrel—an action that fortunately caused him to look down. Because if he'd seen Tress's face, he might have noticed her sudden spike of worry. What was he doing? Was he going to confront her with one of the swapped cannonballs?

Moons…she would have made a terrible spy. How could Salay and the others possibly think she was a King's Mask? Tress didn't understand that it is quite possible to be so bad at something it seems implausible. In these cases, it stands to reason that such a person is in fact quite competent—because it takes true competence to feign such spectacular *in*competence. It's called the transitive property of ineptitude, and is the explanation for anything you've seen me do wrong ever.

In this case, Tress's transitive ineptitude didn't come into play, because Laggart didn't see how nervous she was—nor did he confront her with a fake cannonball. Instead he selected an ordinary cannonball, then held it up as if admiring a beautiful painting. Or—considering the way his bald head on the end of his toothpick neck made him look—perhaps he was wondering if there was any relation.

"Now that we're proper pirates," he said to Tress, "I figure we ought to have someone on this ship besides me and the captain who knows how to fire a cannon. The rest of the crew are too useless around spores to be trained. Congratulations."

She noticed that, despite his bold words, he reached very gingerly into the gunnery barrel and selected a pouch of zephyr spores—holding it pinched between two fingers. He quickly loaded it into the cannon through a latch on the top.

"Zephyr charge goes in here," he said, snapping the metal lid closed. "Get them loaded quickly, because even here, the deck's silver is close enough to start killing spores. Inner casing there is lined with aluminum, to block the silver's influence."

He pushed a wad into the cannon and rammed it into place with a rod. "This rag fills up the bore of the cannon," he explained, "keeps the explosion from going around the ball—and puts the full force on the shot." He slid a cannonball down the front of the cannon. It thumped into place. "Cannon can't angle too low, otherwise we'd roll the ball out the front."

“All right,” Tress said. “But…um, does the captain know you’re having me do this?”

“I’m cannonmaster,” he snapped. “Captain won’t care who I train. You just do as you’re told. Besides, a man needs to take care of himself. I don’t want to end up wounded, then get sunk because nobody else on this damn ship has the guts to handle zephyr.”

So. Laggart didn’t know that she was to be sold to the dragon. This struck Tress as odd, since he seemed to know the rest of the plan. But then she realized there was a good chance the captain considered him a backup sacrifice. He *was* one of the crewmembers who was least afraid of spores.

Laggart picked up a small wooden contraption near the railing, then tossed it overboard. It proved to be a kind of small buoy with a flag, tied by a rope to the ship. As they sailed, it trailed along far behind—like the most conscientious of stalkers.

“Take five shots a day,” Laggart told her. “The best way to get a feel for a cannon is to practice.”

He started to walk away.

“Wait!” Tress said. “You’re not going to give me any more training than that?”

“Training would be useless until you know more,” he said. “I’m busy. Figure it out and don’t bother me with stupid questions. If you sink a buoy, congratulations. There are more in the hold. Come bother me when you can do it in at most two shots, and then we’ll talk about some real training.”

“All right,” Tress said, an idea occurring to her. “But maybe I should start with something less expensive and wasteful than full cannonballs. We don’t have a flare gun on board, do we? I could try that out first.”

“What kind of a stupid question is that?” Laggart said.

It was, identifiably, the stupid kind of stupid question. Which at least is better than the redundant kind of statement.

“A flare gun is nothing like a cannon,” he said. “So just do what I told you, idiot.” He continued muttering to himself as he stalked off.

Tress folded her arms. She’d been *planning* to spend the evening either studying or trying to figure out how to crack Hoid’s curse. This was an unwelcome intrusion. Still, perhaps there were some advantages. If she was planning to build her own spore-based weapon to fight the captain, there were worse uses of her time than

experimenting with a cannon.

It was just that Laggart, by refusing to offer any useful training, had ensured she'd waste hours figuring out the basic mechanics of aiming the cannon. Even with this brief delay at the border, she knew her time was short. Depending on where the dragon's den was in the Crimson Sea, she had anywhere between a few hours and a few weeks to plan.

A solution occurred to her only a moment later. She pushed the cannon forward, as she'd seen Laggart do. Then she smiled, took a firing rod—which had a soaked bit of cloth on the end—and stuck it into the touch hole. A second later an explosion rocked her, knocking the cannon back along its track.

It took less than a minute for Ann's head to pop up behind, wide-eyed and eager.

THE CHICKEN KEEPER

"You use these two winches," Ann explained, rotating a handle—not unlike the one on a meat grinder—at the base of the cannon. "This one turns it port or starboard. This other one raises it up in the air. See, a cannonball drops as it flies. So you have to aim upward and kind of *lob* your shot in an arc."

She pointed. "The tricky part is to judge the distance. You've got a lot of cannonballs with different fuse lengths. To properly immobilize a ship, you need the ball to explode right before hitting, so it sprays water."

"Seems like there should be an easier way," Tress said, sitting on the gunnery barrel. "Like making a cannonball that explodes when it *hits* something. Then you'd only have to aim for the ship, not judge the distance."

"I suppose," Ann said. "Ain't ever heard of anything like that though."

I have, Tress thought, realizing only now what the diagram in her quarters had been talking about. It had mentioned "impact detonation charges." *Someone's planning weapons like that. Maybe already built them.*

It wouldn't be too hard, would it? What if you somehow made a cannonball that was pointed instead of round, so you could fire it tip-forward like an arrow. You could then make it so when it hit

something, that tip was pushed backward into the center to explode the thing.

But a cannonball that wasn't round? Could that even be created? It was kind of in the name, after all…

Ann finished cranking the cannon up, then stood, resting a hand fondly on the weapon. Men, what you want to find is a woman who looks at you like Ann looked at that cannon. Because if such a woman exists, you'll want to move to a completely different kingdom, inform the authorities, and watch the post for packages containing random disembodied fingers.

"Pardon if this is intruding," Tress said, "but why are you so… um…"

"Weird about guns?" Ann asked.

Tress blushed, then nodded.

"Why are you so weird about blushing when you ask questions?" Ann asked.

"I don't want to impose on people."

"You should more often," Ann said. "How else are you going to get what you want?"

"Well…I mean, others shouldn't have to think about what *I* want. It…" She took a deep breath. "Will you tell me, Ann, why you are so weird around guns?"

"Why do you think?" Ann asked. "Any guesses?"

"No. I…did ask Fort, and *he* said he thought you must have been a slave or something when you were a child. He thinks firing guns is about controlling your surroundings. Having access to power."

"Huh," Ann said, settling onto a box of extra cannonballs. "And he's normally so good at figuring people out."

"So you weren't a slave as a child, I take it?"

"Farm girl," she said. "Raised chickens. It was a great life. You know, chickens are really intelligent and make great pets."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's a bloody shame they're so delicious. Any other guesses about me?"

"Well," Tress said, "I asked Salay, and she figured that you see cannons and firearms as symbols of authority, so you want to be in charge of them because people take carpentry for granted—and you want a more important job."

"Ah, well," Ann said, "that's exactly what I'd expect Salay to say. *She's* always been terrible at judging people. Like, *really* terrible."

"I…um…might have noticed," Tress said.

"Please tell me you asked Ulaam about me."

Tress blushed more deeply.

"You did!" Ann said, pointing. "What did he say?"

"I didn't really understand his explanation," Tress replied. "It, um, was something about the shape of the guns…and cigars for some reason?"

Ann laughed. A raucous, untamed sound, full of genuine mirth. Tress couldn't help but smile as well. That kind of laughter quickly overbooks a person and looks for additional accommodations nearby.

"So what is it really?" Tress asked as Ann's laughter finally died down.

"I just…" Ann shrugged. "I think they're nifty."

"That's all?"

"All?" Ann said. "You can basically define someone by the stuff they like, Tress. It's what sets us apart, you know? We talk about how important culture is, but what *is* culture? It ain't government, or language, or any of that hokum. No, it's the stuff we *like*. Plays, stories, marble collections."

"Cups?" Tress said.

"I suppose," Ann said. "Sure, why not? Cups. I'll bet there are a whole ton of people who collect cups. But it's not a cup alone that's interesting."

"It's how one cup is different from other cups."

"Yeah! Exactly." Ann patted the cannon. "And I'm a cup who likes firearms. I love the smell of zephyr puffing out. You know the one? The electric smell of lightning? I love the *challenge* of trying to hit a distant target. Any dumb oaf can hit a bloke who's next to them. But to get one on the next ship over, completely unaware, while he's sipping tea? Bam, now *that's* style."

She looked off into the distance. "I used to listen to the guns fire in the town. Every Twelveday festival. Well, that and the rare times when raiders tried to attack the port. Each time those shots sounded, echoing against the hills, I thought, 'That's going to be me someday.'"

"I'm sorry," Tress said softly, "that you never got the chance."

"Never got the chance?" Ann said. "I enlisted in the militia the day I came of age! Went right into the cannonade crews. Lasted twenty-four days! Right up until…" Ann looked at her. "Did you

know cannonballs can bounce? It was the most lunatic thing. Still think I'm the only cadet in the militia who ever managed to shoot her own sergeant…when he was *behind* her…inside the barracks."

"Wow," Tress said.

Ann sighed, heaving herself up onto her feet. "Anyway, you should try shooting like Laggart told you. Try to fire them so they pass over the buoy, using long fuses for now. Then adjust for the next shot down. Even the best cannoneers use an exploratory shot—helps them judge the wind, get perspective, that sort of thing."

Tress stood, and found herself pricked by a certain lunatic sense of guilt. "You want to take a shot now?"

That is probably the craziest, most reckless thing I've ever heard someone say—and I was literally part of a secret plot to kill God.

"Ha ha," Ann said. "You… Wait, you're serious?"

Tress nodded. "You seem to miss it so much."

Ann leaned in close, inspecting Tress. "You don't even look afraid. You really *are* one of them."

Transitive property of ineptitude. Trust me.

Ann stepped over and put her hand on the cannon, then glanced at Tress. "Laggart will be mad."

"He told me to figure this out on my own," Tress said. "And not to bother him. That's what I'm doing. Asking an expert for advice."

Ann looked back at the cannon. Then at Tress yet again. "*Really?*"

"I've lost things," Tress said softly. "And it's…not going to be easy to get them—him—back. But the thing you want is right here. So, let's make it happen."

Ann smiled again, then glanced at the buoy. She cranked the cannon to the side. Then cranked it some more. Then some more.

"Um, Ann?" Tress said, pointing. "The buoy is *that* way."

Ann followed her pointing, then looked at the cannon—which was *at least* thirty degrees off. "Looks good to me."

"Trust me," Tress said. "Crank it back."

Ann did so reluctantly. She grabbed the firing rod from its bucket. Then—grinning like an undertaker in a war zone—she fired.

Both of them waited, anticipating the worst. And Tress *did* smell a distinctive metallic scent. The cannonball hit the Verdant Sea behind, then vanished. Without harming anyone.

I'll be honest, I was a little surprised myself.

"Thank you," Ann said softly. "*Thank you.*"

"It wasn't really anything," Tress said.

“It was everything,” Ann said. “I was beginning to believe, Tress. What they said. About me being *cursed*. I’m not. I just…well, I have bad aim.” She looked out over the ocean, then wiped her eyes. “Not cursed. You don’t understand how much I needed to know that.”

“Join me each day,” Tress said. “Take a shot with me. We can get better together.”

“Deal.”

“Oh,” Tress said. “One other thing. Do you know if the ship has a flare gun?”

“Of course,” Ann said. “You need them if you get stranded, or to surrender to pirates. Oh! Guess we don’t need to worry about that anymore. Surrender means death to us. Anyway, you should be able to get one from Fort.”

Ann excused herself after that—tears of joy aren’t exactly a good match with an unprotected part of the ship. Tress settled down, thinking about people and how the holes in them could be filled by such simple things, like time, or a few words at the right moment. Or, apparently, a cannonball. What, other than a person, could you build up merely by caring?

Eventually Tress fired a few shots of her own. (They all missed too.) As she was cleaning up afterward, the ship finally turned upon the captain’s order. This time no rains chased them off as they entered the Crimson Sea.

THE CHEF

40

The following evening, Tress took stock of the ship's cooking ingredients. What she found was not inspiring. Stale flour, very few useful seasonings, rancid oil. And the ship's oven? Fueled by sunlight spores in a way that made the kilnlike device heat in an *impossibly* uneven way. A quick test of wet flour on a baking pan proved that.

No wonder Fort had difficulty cooking anything without burning it. Indeed, it was possible he did it on purpose in order to cover up the awful flavor of the ingredients. She gave him a look with folded arms, and he shrugged. They didn't need his writing board for that exchange.

"All right," she said, handing him the bottle of rancid oil. "Toss *this* overboard. It's too far gone."

He regarded it with a thoughtful eye, the bottle looking much smaller in his enormous hands, held between two curled, broken fingers. He was so big, Tress couldn't help wondering if he was fully human—which was understandable, but all joking aside, Fort was a hundred percent human. Plus at least twenty percent of something else I haven't been able to determine.

"Trust me," Tress said. "We can make something of the flour, but there's no good use for the oil."

That you know of, he wrote. **You'd be surprised at the things**

people will trade for. He tucked it away. Together, they occupied the ship's small kitchen, which wasn't much bigger than Fort's quartermaster office—though this room had counters running all around with cupboards underneath, broken only by the door on one side and the oven on the other.

"Here," Tress said, pushing a small pile of kulunuts across the counter to him. "Mash these."

Mash?

"Yes, and do it in the mortar so you don't lose any of the liquid. Kulunuts have a lot of fat to them, and we're going to need that, since the oil is bad."

He shrugged, doing as she ordered while Tress made some small alterations with pans to turn the oven into a steamer. "For a more even bake," she explained at his curious expression. "Steam is a good conductor."

But aren't we making bread?

"Nut bread," she said, sifting the flour to check for any mold. Old flour she could work with, but moldy flour? That was *far* worse. Fortunately, this seemed dry and pure enough. "We need to avoid basic breads. Old flour has a bad taste, but it won't make us sick. So we need something where taste won't be too noticeable. Kulunut bread should be workable—and we can steam it."

He took her at her word, continuing to mash. Over the next hour, Tress found herself falling back into old routines. How many times had she cooked food for her parents, using whatever they could afford or scavenge? There was a calming familiarity about doing so again, if on a much larger scale.

She hoped her parents were doing all right without her. She'd intended to write to them, but with all that had happened… Suddenly she felt guilty for having wished for more letters from Charlie. If his experiences on the seas had been anything like hers, then it was a miracle he'd found time to send her what he had.

Fort didn't fill the time with idle chitchat, and while you might ascribe this to his deafness, I've known more than a few Deaf people who were quite the blabberhands. Fort watched everything she did carefully—and she found his attention difficult to interpret. Was he trying to learn from her? Or was he suspicious of her?

Uncertain, she popped out the first of her test cakes, sliced off a corner, and offered it to him. Fort picked it up between the sides of his hands. He inspected it. Sniffed it. Tried it. Then cried.

This type of response will send any artist into a panic. Tears wash away the middle ground—all the infinite permutations of mediocre are eliminated, and two options remain: one sublime, the other catastrophic. For a moment, both interpretations existed in a kind of quantum state for Tress. And people wonder why artists so often abuse drink.

Fort reached for another bite.

Tress's sigh of relief could have filled the sails. She went back to chopping gull—this, thankfully, was fresh—for the meat pies. But Fort tapped her on the shoulder.

How did you do that? he wrote. **I watched for sleight of hand.**

"What would I use sleight of hand for?"

Secret ingredients. Swapping one cake for another, pre-prepared.

"Are you always this suspicious?"

I'm a quartermaster on a pirate ship, he said.

"Well, there were no swapped cakes," she said. "And no secret ingredients other than practice and resourcefulness."

He reached for a third bite.

"How much," she said as she chopped, "would you say a meal like this each day would be worth?"

Fort stood up straight, then eyed her, smiling slyly. **Oh, I guess that's a matter for debate, isn't it?**

"That third bite you took suggests the debate is already over."

He hesitated, mid-finger-lick. Then he typed, **I thought you said you weren't tricking me.**

"Curious," she said. "I don't remember saying that. I only stated that the bread was genuine. Not that I wasn't trying to trick you. Care for a fourth piece?"

Now, it should be noted that Tress proceeded with this conversation under a slight weight of guilt. She wanted Fort to like her, and she wasn't generally one to demand trades or payments from friends.

Yet she'd watched how he interacted with others. Fort wasn't a selfish man. He'd not only been the one to haul her up that first day, he'd given her food when she needed it. He always seemed to have what people needed, quietly providing medicine, shoes, or even a deck of cards for a Doug in need. And he rarely took something of equal worth in trade.

Yet with people like Ann or Salay, he'd bargain fiercely for the

smallest items. Even ones they *should* be able to requisition from the ship's stores. Tress thought maybe he was like her Aunt Glorf, who had always fought for the best deals at the market. She'd been afraid of looking silly by being taken advantage of.

The guess was as wrong as ending a sentence with a preposition. But it worked anyway. Like ending a sentence with a preposition. Because it convinced her to bargain, even when she didn't want to impose.

Do this once for each day I fed you, Fort said, **and our debt will be equal.**

"Now, that *would* seem like a fair deal," Tress said, "if one happened to be using a rotting loaner brain that Ulaam dug out of his bottom drawer. The food you provided me, Fort, was practically worthless. I'd say that one good meal should balance out a few dozen terrible ones."

The food wasn't worthless, Fort said, mashing some more nuts. He could hold the pestle in his curled fingers quite easily, pausing now and then to tap with his knuckles on the top of his board—which, resting on the counter, now displayed the words on the same surface. **Food has a minimum threshold of usefulness, assuming it's not poisonous.**

"It wasn't poisonous," Tress said, "but it sure *tried*."

It kept you alive, and a life is invaluable, I'd say. So my food, provided when you couldn't get any other, was therefore priceless.

"Ah," Tress said as she chopped, "but the captain has repeatedly said my life is worthless. So your food, in turn, is the same."

If you have no value, Fort wrote, mashing nuts with one hand and tapping with the other, **then surely your labor is barely worth anything at all. And hence, I should be able to employ you for a pittance.**

"Well then," Tress said, "I suppose if that's the case, then I'll find some other way to repay you. What a shame." She took the last piece of the test cake before he could grab it, then popped it in her mouth.

Oh *moons*, she'd forgotten what it was like to eat without forcibly suppressing her gag reflex.

Fort rubbed his chin, then grinned. **All right, fine. Each day of work providing adequate meals like this pays off two days of meals I gave you.**

“Five,” Tress said.

Three.

“Deal,” she replied, “but you can’t tell the others that these meals are mine. I can’t afford to be roped into cooking breakfast and lunch as well. I have other work to do.”

The crew will get suspicious if two meals are bad and one is incredible.

“So the food is incredible, is it?” she said.

He froze, then grinned again. **I underestimated you.**

“Hopefully that’s catching,” she said. “You’re a resourceful man, Fort. You can come up with an excuse to put off the crew. Tell them you’re trying new recipes, but only have time to practice one a day. Plus, if we get that oven working, the things you make might not be so…”

Unique? he wrote.

“Unrecognizable.”

A deal, I suppose. Assuming you agree to make dessert each day as well. The Dougs have been asking for one that doesn’t melt the plates before it can be eaten.

“They’ve been asking for *more* of what you were making? Moons, how many of those bargain bin brains did Ulaam have?”

Fort laughed out loud. It was a full laugh, but not like Ann’s raucous one. More unrestrained than uncontrolled. It was the laugh of someone who didn’t care how they sounded or looked to others.

I’m wrong, she realized. *He’s not worried about seeming silly by being taken advantage of.*

Well? he wrote. **Dessert?**

“I want a flare gun,” she said, sliding her chopped meat into a pie tin, “with flares. Without questions.”

He eyed her.

Mask business? he wrote.

“Maybe.”

Will it help us with our predicament? He pointed upward toward the captain’s cabin.

“I hope so.”

Then you may have it. In trade for desserts for the rest of the trip.

“Until we reach our destination in the Crimson Sea,” Tress said.

I wasn’t aware we had one. Curious. Well, so be it. He wiped his hand, then held it out.

She shook to seal the deal.

Thank you, Fort said. **Genuinely.**

"For the food?" she asked.

For the trade.

"Why *do* you like it so much, Fort?" she asked, leaning against the counter.

I am a hunter by profession, he explained. **It is a mark of pride among my people, and my family in particular, to execute an excellent hunt.**

"…Hunt?"

Well, we've broadened the definition over the years, he explained. **Turns out, a whole society of hunters doesn't scale well. Who's going to make the shoes? Bake the bread? Plan the weddings?** He tapped, blanking the board, then continued, **So, we choose our hunt when we come of age. This is mine. A worthy hunt, same as my mother. I record each great victory and send them home in letters to be hung in our family hall.**

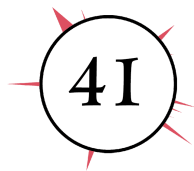
"Wow," Tress said.

You're impressed? Ann laughed.

"I am impressed," she said. "Plus, I have a friend who'd love hearing that story. I hope you can meet him someday. Is…your trade deal with me today going to go in one of the letters?"

He laughed again. **Tress, it would embarrass you to know how successful my hunt just was. Have you eaten my food? The first bite of bread you gave me was worth every meal I gave you in the past. And you have not only promised more, but are going to let me take credit with the Dougs?** He winked at her. **I'm going to brag about this catch for three pages! Now, hurry up. I want to try one of those pies.**

THE PHILOSOPHER



Cutting apart a spore-filled flare while distracted wasn't the best of ideas—but admittedly Tress hadn't *decided* to be distracted. It happened naturally, like a case of the hiccups or the inevitable and relentless entropic decay of the universe.

As she pried the stiff wax-paper cap off the flare, she mulled over the pure joy Fort experienced when negotiating. It had always made her nervous to haggle at the market, as she didn't want to make the merchants feel that their goods were worthless or their service unvalued. Yet Fort *loved* the haggling part.

And Ann, shooting the cannon. Tress thought about her while carefully pouring the spores out of the flare. Had Tress ever seen anyone so excited about anything as Ann got? Even Charlie with a freshly cooked pie hadn't looked so content.

Tress tapped the flare carefully, then glanced at Huck, who had insisted on joining her at the worktable—but hid under a large soup bowl, holding it up an inch or so to peek out. He was mostly afraid of the spores at the moment, though she'd caught him hiding a lot more lately. Even when the cat wasn't around.

"What's that?" he asked as a pink stone sphere rolled from the center of the flare.

"The water charge," she explained, holding it up to the porthole to show light through the pink stone. A shadow of water sloshed

inside when she shook it. “When this breaks, the water floods out and ignites the spores. In this case, sunlight spores that burn with a bright hot light.”

“Oh,” he said, lifting the bowl higher. “So those don’t explode?”

“Nope,” Tress said. “But they could burn us as they create a bright flash and heat.” She set a cannonball on the table with a thump. “Now, one of *these* is filled with zephyr spores. So it will explode right good.”

Huck pointedly lowered his shield. Tress rolled the little ball of water-filled roseite back and forth on the table. She remembered sermons on the various Moondays, held at the very top of her island. On the Verdant Moondays, they’d been able to watch the alignment of sun and moon. She had always felt she was missing something at those meetings, since the alignment—from their side—looked like any other moonshadow, which happened every day. But apparently the sun centered *exactly* behind the moon only twice a year.

During such an eclipse, the preachers spoke about respecting the moons and about the meaning of life. Except every preacher who visited the island seemed to have a different idea of what the purpose of life was. Even two preachers from the same moonschool would disagree

That part had comforted her. If *religion* couldn’t get it together, then she could be forgiven for being a mess herself.

But now—as she dug in the remnants of the flare for the timer—she wondered. Each of those preachers had acted like they had the answer, like there was one purpose in life. All life. She understood the inclination. A single answer would certainly make things *tidier*. Two plus two is four. Water boils at a specific temperature. Also, the purpose of life is to learn to imitate the call of a marmoset. Go.

For Fort, finding a good trade was the purpose of life. While for Ann, the purpose was to learn to fire a cannon without blowing the limbs off her friends by accident. So were there *many* answers? Or were they all the same answer with different applications?

It should be noted that Tress would have made an excellent philosopher. In fact, she had already determined that philosophy wasn’t as valuable as she’d assumed—something that takes most great philosophers at least three decades to realize.

She finally pried out the timer, then set it on the table. The flare gun, she noted, worked a lot like an ordinary pistol. You loaded it

with a separate charge for firing.

"So…what are we doing?" Huck asked.

"Look here," she said, prying a silver bit off the timer. Conical, sharp on one end, like the tip of a pencil. "This is what makes the flare go off. The silver breaks through the roseite core, which is filled with water.

"What I'm going to do is reverse this. I'm going to put this pointed bit on the *top* of the flare, but facing backward. So when the flare hits something, the silver will be pushed back, break the roseite ball, and let out the water."

"I mean, sure," Huck said. "That sounds like it would work. But *why*?"

"I need to find a way to stop Crow," Tress explained. "But as we saw when we attacked those merchants, a normal gun won't hurt her."

"And you're hoping a flare will?" Huck said.

"Not exactly," she said, then began to rebuild the flare. Not only did she put the silver detonator under the cap instead of at the base of the flare, she replaced the sunlight spores with sand and a few grains of verdant spores. She closed the device back up without the timer, then inspected it. "I asked Ulaam earlier today, and he said that the spores living in Crow's blood will protect her from any weapon that tries to break her skin. So I figure I'll stop her without hurting her."

"How on the seas would you do that?"

"Same way we stop ships without sinking them," she said. "I build a flare that explodes with verdant vines, then use those to stick her to the wall or the floor. If I can make this work, I won't have to kill—or even hurt—her. I can immobilize her, then let Salay take over the ship."

"That's brilliant!" Huck said, peeking out farther from beneath his bowl. "Do you think it will really work?"

Tress loaded the flare—along with some zephyr spores—into the flare gun, which had a stubby, oversized barrel. She sighted down it, but didn't pull the trigger—which would inject water into the barrel and launch the projectile. Testing this sort of thing in her quarters didn't seem healthy.

But how *could* she test it? She needed to be able to hit something solid to break the water cartridge, so she couldn't simply fire it out the porthole. But she also didn't want to let Crow know what she

was building.

She'd have to find another way. She set the gun down, then glanced to the side as Huck—finally abandoning his hiding spot—came crawling over.

"Hey," he said, "you look sad. It's all right, Tress. You'll find a way out of this. You're good, and you're smart. You'll make it."

"If I do," she said softly, "it will mean consigning Crow to death. Her disease will eat her from the inside if she doesn't make a trade with the dragon."

Huck wrung his paws, his nose twitching. He didn't say the obvious thing: that Crow absolutely did *not* deserve sympathy. Tress knew this already, and he knew that she did.

Unfortunately, sympathy is not a valve, to be turned off when it starts to flood the yard. Indeed, the path to a life without empathy is a long and painful one, full of bartered humanity sold at a steep discount.

To distract herself from what she was planning to do to Crow, Tress inspected the timer that she'd left out in reconstructing the flare. The small device looked exactly like the schematic had described: a bit of verdant vine for a fuse, already grown from spores, and a small glass vial, which—being far more flimsy than the roseite bead—would break upon firing.

She pried out the vine, then—causing Huck to back up in concern—poured a little water on it. The small vine curled and trembled. She watched it for a time, then figured she should practice with her tools.

The vine wiggled a little more vigorously.

Tress hesitated, then leaned down closer. The aether grew steadily, though it was still no longer than her finger. Then the tip—the part that was growing—turned toward her. The little vine crept in her direction.

Tress scooted to the side. The tip of the vine began growing in that direction instead.

Her confusion deepening, Tress scooted her chair the other direction. Again the vine moved, leaving a zigzag in its expanding length as the tip followed her.

It was running out of water, so she wet it again. Then she got down low, watching it creep toward her. Was it…looking for something? Back home, she'd found some weeds in a dim shed that had somehow survived the salt. Those weeds had all grown directly

toward the single knothole of light in the boards.

"What are you doing?" Huck said, cautiously approaching.

She put out her finger and the tip of the vine grew toward it, then became a little corkscrew as she made a spiraling motion. It responded to her, not Huck.

Because he's a rat? Or…because he's frightened of it? But she was scared of spores too, wasn't she?

Except this little vine wasn't dangerous. So…no, she didn't feel afraid. Not at the moment.

When she'd used the midnight spores, she'd been attached to the creation. Curiously, she felt something similar at that moment with the vine. A Connection. She thought she could feel it searching. It was empty, but looking. Wanting.

I understand, she thought to the vine, letting it touch her finger and coil softly around it. Fort had his trades, and Ann her guns. But what did Tress have? She wanted to save Charlie, but that wasn't her purpose. That was her goal.

She glanced toward her cups. While she was still fond of them, she had to acknowledge that she really only looked at them these days because they reminded her of Charlie. The cups themselves didn't hold the charm they once had for her. She had seen too much of the world now. Not merely the places either.

The vine ran out of water and stilled, leaving her finger wrapped —but not with a menacing grip. A light touch. Curious, not dangerous.

She found it remarkable. How could this be? The entire world interacted with spores—at least dead ones—every day. People feared them with just cause. Yet this one felt more like a puppy than a deadly force of destruction.

Could the entire *world* have misjudged something so common? Though it seemed unlikely to Tress, it was true—and not that surprising. People consistently misjudge common things in their lives. (Other people come to mind.)

Tress wasn't discovering something completely unknown. Indeed she was realizing why spores and aethers fascinated sprouters. It all had to do with fear.

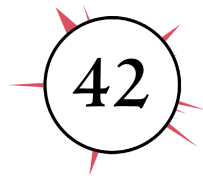
While a healthy measure of foolhardiness drove our ancestors toward discovery, fear kept them alive. If bravery is the wind that makes us soar like kites, fear is the string that keeps us from going too far. We need it, but the thing is, our heritage taught us to fear

some of the wrong things.

For example, to our ancient ancestors, strange and new people often meant new diseases and the occasional spear tossed at our softer bits. Today, the only things new people are likely to toss our way are some interesting curse words we can use to impress our friends.

Fear of something like the aethers? Well, it's as natural as nipples, but nearly as vestigial as the male variety. And when one abandons certain fears and assumptions, an entire world opens up.

THE GUIDE



I love memories. They are our ballads, our personal foundation myths. But I must acknowledge that memory *can* be cruel if left unchallenged.

Memory is often our only connection to who we used to be. Memories are fossils, the bones left by dead versions of ourselves. More potently, our minds are a hungry audience, craving only the peaks and valleys of experience. The bland erodes, leaving behind the distinctive bits to be remembered again and again.

Painful or passionate, surreal or sublime, we cherish those little rocks of peak experience, polishing them with the ever-smoothing touch of recycled proxy living. In so doing—like pagans praying to a sculpted mud figure—we make of our memories the gods which judge our current lives.

I love this. Memory may not be the heart of what makes us human, but it's at least a vital organ. Nevertheless, we must take care not to let the bliss of the present fade when compared to supposedly better days. We're happy, sure, but were we *more* happy then? If we let it, memory can make shadows of the now, as nothing can match the buttressed legends of our past.

I think about this a great deal, for it is my job to sell legends. Package them, commodify them. For a small price, I'll let you share my memories—which I solemnly promise are real, or will be as long

as you agree not to cut them too deeply.

Do not let memory chase you. Take the advice of one who has dissected the beast, then rebuilt it with a more fearsome face—which I then used to charm a few extra coins out of an inebriated audience. Enjoy memories, yes, but don't be a slave to who you wish you once had been.

Those memories aren't alive. You are.

Personally, I don't think I gave proper attention to just how beautiful Tress's world was. To me, it was a backwater planet drowning in the dross of the aethers, which are more useful in other incarnations—and far easier to harvest on the moons themselves anyway.

And yet, nowhere else in my travels have I witnessed anything like those spores. As we sailed the Crimson, I felt like a leaf floating on the blood of a fallen giant. The farther we went, the higher the Crimson Moon soared—dark and ominous in the day, often haloed by sunlight. A clot upon the light.

At night, it burst aflame with its own unblinking, preternatural glow. At first we were too far away to see the sporefall, but as we closed the distance, the lunagree appeared. A fountain from the sky, pouring down into the center of the sea. The verdant spores had always looked like pollen in the air, but this felt like a lava flow. Erupting from the heavens to melt away the planet.

I wasn't in my right mind during the trip, but I could still see. And the polished bits of that land in my memory are always striking images. Surreal, spellbinding pictures of magic so dominant it *literally* fell from the sky.

I believe Tress might have been more pleased if the view *hadn't* been so stunning. She'd have had a better chance of keeping my attention.

"Would you *please* focus, Hoid?" the girl asked.

I pointed at the distant red moon, the spores streaming down to fill the sea. "It looks like the moon is throwing up."

Tress sighed.

"Imagine that the sea is the toilet," I said, "and the moon is the face of a god, heaving onto us after a long night of getting spun around and around on a bar stool."

I actually composed a poem about a vomiting god. I'll spare you, though it's the only time I've had an excuse to make a really good rhyme for "scarf."

Finally, after some prodding, I turned from my newfound muse and settled down on the deck near Tress. She would have preferred to work with me belowdecks, out of sight, but I had been stubborn. I'd wanted to watch the moon barf. As one does.

"We need to break the curse," she said.

"Ah yes," I said. Then I leaned in close, speaking conspiratorially. "You know, I have one of those."

"A curse?"

"Indeed."

"I know, Hoid."

"You do?"

"Yes. It's why we can talk about it. If I didn't know, you couldn't tell me."

"I can't tell you something you don't know, but only things you already know?"

"Yes, because of the curse."

"Oh! A curse! I—"

"—have one of those. I know. I need to break yours so you can lead me to the Sorceress. Nobody knows where in the Midnight Sea she can be found."

I fell silent.

"Hoid?" she asked. "Do you understand?"

"I think I understand. But, see, it's hard." I leaned in closer. "I can tell you…"

"Yes?"

"Something important…"

"Yes?"

"Socks with sandals," I whispered. "The new fashion movement. Trust me. It will be *all* the rage."

She sighed with increasing exasperation.

I'm accustomed to that reaction from people, but I prefer to be *intentionally* irritating. It's against my professional ethics to frustrate people by accident. It's like…a construction worker making a new road while sleepwalking. The foreman would have a fit. How in the world does one make a sleepwalker take a union-mandated break? Do you wake them up?

"Look," Tress said, "I have this paper here, see? And I've written down a lot of words that I think would have to do with curses. Are there any you can't talk to me about? If so, that will give me a clue."

It was a workable idea. I would have been impressed, if I hadn't been distracted by wondering whether anyone had made clothing out of napkins yet.

Tress handed me the list of words. I studied them, cocked my head to the side, then nodded.

"Anything?" she asked.

"I," I declared, "have apparently forgotten how to read."

Showing legendary patience, Tress took the list back and read the words to me. I repeated them.

"Well?" she asked.

"I definitely have heard some of those words before," I said. "Now, I forgot the rules. Is this the game where I draw a picture of the word, or is it the game where I act them out?"

She groaned and lay back on the deck, her head thumping the wood. "Could you maybe lead me to the Sorceress *without* getting your curse broken?"

I fell silent.

"Hoid?"

I smiled at her. I'd blacked out one of my teeth to make it seem like it was missing, as I figured that must be quite fashionable. A number of the Dougs were sporting the look, after all.

"Maybe I could say letters to you," she said, "and you could think of the way to break your curse. I could ask you, 'Is this letter in the word?' Theoretically, you won't be able to say yes if it were."

This one wouldn't have worked. It was an easy enough workaround that the Sorceress had thought of it, and had basically "programmed" the curse to forbid the person from confirming words this way.

In addition, in this specific instance…well…

"Letters," I said. "Spelling words. Reading…"

"Right," Tress said. "Right. You never answered my question, though. Could you lead me to the Sorceress? Even without being uncursed?"

I fell silent.

A part of me was hoping she'd notice how loud that silence was.

"Wait," she said, sitting up. "Every time I talk about sailing to see the Sorceress, you get quiet."

"Do I?" I asked.

"Those are the only times when I've been around you that you haven't had anything to say…" Her eyes widened. "Hoid, you can't

talk about the Sorceress or her island, right?"

I, notably, was unable to answer.

"Hoid," she said, "can you talk about the king's island?"

"I've been there once!" I said. "Have you heard the story about the king's tosher? I don't really remember it, but it has poop in it, so it *must* be funny!"

"Talking about visiting the king's island didn't make you shut up," she said, "but talking about the Sorceress's island did…" She stood up. "I need a map."

And there. After only a few days of trying, she'd discovered more about helping me than Ulaam had in our year together. That stupid shapeshifter was *enjoying* this. I swear, they've all been getting weirder ever since Sazed released them.

Anyway, Salay was at her usual post, guiding the ship deeper into the Crimson. She didn't have a map of the Midnight up there, but—upon Tress's request—she sent a Doug to fetch one from her quarters. It wasn't particularly detailed; none of the maps of the Midnight Sea are. Fortunately, the *shape* was roughly correct, since all of the seas are basically pentagons.

Tress started pointing to places on the map and asking, "Hoid, I'd like you to guide us here. Could you do that?"

Each time, I told her some terribly interesting fact about a place—such as having walked there wearing butter instead of shoes. Until she reached a specific point.

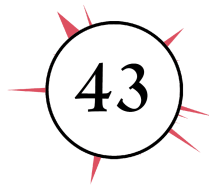
When she asked about that one, I fell silent.

When I stop talking, people often act happy. It's a hazard of my profession. But this time it was different. Tress pulled the map to her chest, her eyes watering.

She knew where the Sorceress's island was. Near the border of the Midnight Sea and the Crimson Sea, perhaps half a day's sail inward.

It was the first concrete piece of information she'd found. The first real step toward rescuing Charlie. It was a beautiful moment that was ruined as a sudden line of rainfall appeared on the horizon—then shot straight for our ship.

THE MUSICIAN



I know that sailors fear storms on your planet. It's common among all seafaring cultures I've met. Interestingly, most also ascribe—or in their past used to ascribe—volition to storms. They never simply *are*. They *want something*.

The weather patterns on Tress's world aren't specifically Invested—so they aren't self-aware. But you wouldn't have known that from the way the rain came straight toward the *Crow's Song*.

Tress stared at it, growing numb, the joy of her grand discovery fading. It could all end right here, couldn't it? All her struggles, her preparations…it could simply end. The *Crow's Song* could vanish in the rain, speared through at a hundred different angles, then pulled into the deep.

And Tress was powerless to do anything about it.

Moments like these bring wind and rain to life. We need purpose; it's the spiritual conjunction that glues together human existence and human volition. Purpose is so integral to us that we see it everywhere.

Sky gods, making thunder with their shouts or causing lightning to fall with their steps. Winds named and granted different intentions and motives, depending on the direction they blow. Rains withheld, granted, or sent to destroy, depending on the turning of celestial moods.

A storm is not an object like a box or a tree. Even to the more scientifically-minded, storms are more notion than numbers. When does a drizzle become a downpour, and when does a downpour become a storm? There's no firm line. It's about how you feel.

A storm is an idea. It's much more powerful that way. Watching the rain bear down on her—crimson spikes marching behind it like the crossed spears of royal guards—Tress *wanted* it to be a deliberate act of the moons. She didn't want her death to be meaningless.

The ship lurched to the side, making Tress stumble. She cried out and grabbed the rail, then quickly snatched the map of the Midnight Sea before it could blow away. Another lurch of the ship sent her stumbling the other direction. It seemed random to her, but Salay was calling orders nearby, and the Dougs obeyed, managing the sails.

Salay didn't particularly care if her death was meaningless *or* deliberate. Provided it was a long time coming.

As I mentioned, on your planet, you may be accustomed to the helm position on the ship being relatively unimportant.

Not so on the spore seas. The ship lurched again, wood groaning, canvas rattling. A sailing ship isn't like most vehicles; it takes time and effort to change its momentum. Tress hung on, eyes wide, as *Captain Crow* caught a dropped rope and pulled it tight. Even she obeyed Salay's orders in this moment.

Nearby, three Dougs rushed to the wheel, helping Salay heave to the side, bending hundreds of tons of wood to her will. The *Crow's Song* veered right to the side of the line of rain, skirting so close to the wall of aether that a few of the crimson spears *scraped* the hull. Salay called for the sailors to steady and slow, for a reason Tress didn't understand—until she saw that the giant snarls of interlocking spikes were sinking.

The aethers emerging from their spores had set the sea rippling, and their retreat doubled that, making it billow and quake. You don't normally get true waves on the spore seas—not like you do on liquid oceans—but when you do, they're extremely dangerous.

The *Crow's Song* shook like the ice in a good cocktail, then tipped to the side like the person who's enjoyed too many. Tress immediately felt sick to her stomach, then panicked at the thought of what vomit would do on a deck in the middle of the spores. She managed to find a bucket, her first job on the ship proving useful in

an unexpected way.

Through it all, Salay kept shouting orders. It was almost as if she kept the ship from capsizing through sheer force of will. She moved the vessel at times against the waves, but at others she spun the wheel to flow with the pattern. In those few moments, the ship was a giant musical instrument, and she played it as a master, steering us to safety.

Unfortunately, right at the end, one final wave broke against the side of the ship. This spilled spores across the deck. Violent. Scarlet. Thirsty. Enough to overwhelm the silver protections for a few seconds. And Tress wasn't the only one who had been ill.

It happened with a burst of red on red. A flash of spikes on the main deck, near the steps up to the quarterdeck. In the blink of an eye, one of the Dougs had been nailed to the wood outside the captain's cabin. I'll leave off crass comparisons to pincushions and just say this: I've never seen a man bleed out so quickly. But I've also never seen a man with so many places for the blood to escape.

Everyone stared at the terrible scene, and Tress groaned, turning back to her bucket for a second unmealing. Then the Dougs—remembering their training—scrambled for the emergency towels to sop up the blood and prevent any from leaking over the side of the ship. In the Verdant, a stream of blood over the side could have immobilized them. Here it would rip the ship to pieces.

Fortunately, ships on the spore seas are built to prevent this, with all seams pitched and sealed. The silver eventually did its job—and everyone walked across dead grey spores, grinding them against the wood.

In the midst of this dreary scene, the ship ground to a halt. The stilling had arrived.

I'll admit to feeling uneasy, even now, about those days crossing the Crimson. I know the cosmology and arcanum of Tress's planet quite well, and I'm confident that no entity directs its storms.

And yet. Knowing is not always believing.

The two dozen of us on deck turned, as one, to watch the rains veer and inexplicably bear down on us again. Relentless. Water in front leading a charge of violent aethers behind, wide as three ships beside one another.

A storm *is* a living thing, even when not specifically Invested. Because "life," as a concept, is a human construct. *We* define it. Nature doesn't care; it sees everything as a chemical process. It

couldn't care in the slightest that a bunch of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen one day decided it would really prefer to sit on a sofa rather than a bench.

Therefore, something lives if we decide it does. To us on that ship, that day, the rains *were* alive. They had to be. And I know for a fact Tress was shaken not only physically, but emotionally as she looked up from her bucket to see the rain coming again. Captain Crow was powerless to do anything. Not even Salay could save the ship during the stilling.

The line of water missed us by a few hundred yards.

What had seemed, in our horrified eyes, a direct attempt to kill us had instead been random chance. So we watched as the rain vanished into the distance, leaving a persistent wall of red thorns. They towered high, a barricade that would only sink once the seethe began again.

The rain danced around in circles in the distance, then vanished. A capricious god taunting us? A natural process, given autonomy only by our brains as they searched for patterns, meaning, and volition?

I know what I believed that day.

THE FALLEN

I implied that I didn't remember the names of the Dougs. That was a lie—I wanted to keep your focus on the main players of this particular story.

But every person has a story, Dougs included. The one who died was named Pakson; both he and his sister were Dougs on the *Crow's Song*. Pakson was tall and awkward on land—the type of man who seemed to have been born with legs a size too large for his torso. He was bald, despite his relative youth, and his neck kind of merged with his chin—to the point that after meeting him, you'd inexplicably get a hankering for a baguette.

He was also unaccountably kind. He was the man who had kept checking on Tress as she clung to the side of the ship. He'd held the rope with several others as Fort pulled her up.

He'd always laughed at meals and thanked Fort for the food, no matter how bad it had tasted. He loved music, but couldn't play, and had always secretly regretted never learning. I wish I'd been in a state of mind to give him lessons.

Now he had fallen. We gave his corpse to the spores and sailed onward.

Tress felt responsible. Maybe if the ship had waited a few more months out in the Verdant, they wouldn't have encountered the rains that day. She was terrified that Pakson wouldn't be the only

casualty of her recklessness. So she sought her room—and the distracting comfort of her spores.

As always, Huck was there. Talking to her about life as a rat. His voice distracted her from her problems. The ratty tales were relaxing; even when he spoke of fears and challenges among the rat community, she found herself soothed. Because those events had happened far away. They were personal, yet somehow abstract at the same time..

"It's really interesting," he was telling her, "how much we can smell of the world that you don't seem to be able to. Everyone's *shoes* smell different. Did you know that?"

"I'd have thought they all smelled the same."

"Not to a rat!" Huck said, sitting on the table next to where she was working. He launched into a story about how he'd been able to follow a human through a crowd by sniffing for the distinctive scent of his boots.

Tress half listened, half worked. She was tinkering with the other flares for her augmented flare gun. In each, she adjusted the amounts of the various types of spores, then recorded them in a notebook so she could see which experiment worked the best.

Up above, gulls called in the air. The Dougs, perhaps needing something to take their own minds off what had happened to Pakson, were fishing the air to catch meat for upcoming meals. Plus, birds were very rare on the Crimson, so you moved when you had the chance.

Tress soon had four different flares alongside four different charges. Each flare would theoretically release verdant aether upon hitting, but how much each released was different, which would help her iterate the design. And the charges each had differing amounts of zephyr spores.

She told herself this work would help the other crewmembers. The sooner she found a way to disable Crow, the sooner they could all point the prow out of the Crimson. Regrettably, this argument found a hostile audience, even though she made it only to herself. She *was* planning, after all, on trying to get the crew to sail the Midnight next—and it was said to be even *more* dangerous.

How many lives was she willing to risk to save one man? At what point did the good of her crew outweigh that of Charlie?

You might think this an unfair moral problem to force upon a simple window washer, but there's a certain arrogance in that kind

of reasoning. A window washer can think, same as anyone else, and their lives are no less complex. And as I've warned you, "simple" labor often leaves plenty of time for thought.

Yes, intellectuals and scholars are *paid* to think deep thoughts—but those thoughts are often owned by others. It is a great irony that society tends to look down on those who sell their bodies, but not on those who lease out their minds.

As Tress set the final flare in the row, Huck trailed off.

"So…I guess now we have to test them," he said. "Any thoughts on how to do that?"

"Well," she said, "the Dougs have mostly been staying on the upper deck lately. And the hold is empty of goods."

Huck nodded; it was the most obvious choice. She set him on her shoulder, then packed her flares, gun, and notebook in her bag. She went and explained to Laggart that she wanted to inspect the handiwork Ann had done patching the hull down below. It might, Tress explained, help her understand how to make better roseite patches in the future.

It was an unremarkable lie, but if Laggart saw through it, he likely thought she was trying to make work to stay busy. The cannonmaster gave his permission and said he'd keep anyone from bothering her. The exchange was so relatively pleasant, Tress briefly wondered if something was wrong with him.

On her way down, a Doug called from the rigging, pointing into the distance. Another rainline had been spotted. Tress's breath caught, but the rain—this time—swerved away from the ship and vanished soon after.

Tress tore her eyes away and hastened down to the ship's cavernous hold. She latched the trap door at the top of the steps for a little extra security, then set out her three oil lamps—something denied to common sailors. It was unwise to leave too many things burning when you lived in what was essentially a giant dry, hollow piece of firewood.

The hold was half empty, having disgorged its goods at the last stop before the Crimson. Foodstuffs and water supplies made up her audience as she loaded a charge, then a flare, into her weapon. She then turned and raised the gun toward the empty aft portion of the hold.

Huck, to his credit, didn't run, though he did cower a bit in her hair, which she left unbraided more often these days—in a tail or

just unrestrained, waving free. She paid for that with the brush at nights, but it felt...liberating. At home, she'd always been embarrassed for how her hair behaved. But out here, there were so many more pressing things to worry about.

Tress pulled the trigger—which caused the gun's hammer to hit the flare with enough force to break the tiny glass vial in the charge. Zephyr spores exploded, releasing air, faintly blue. The flare popped out the front of the gun…

…then flew approximately a foot before nose-diving into the floor. She probably should have used a tad more zephyr.

Unfortunately for Tress, the rest of her work had been meticulous. She'd fundamentally grasped the nature of the mechanisms from the schematics. And so, her design functioned perfectly. When the flare hit the deck nose-first, the shock pushed the silver point inside into the sphere of roseite, releasing the water.

Verdant vines exploded outward, seizing Tress and enwrapping her with dizzying speed. She felt an initial spike of fear and some discomfort as the vines constricted, lifting her up a good two feet. But there was no actual pain, and once it was over she felt more humiliated than frightened.

"Tress!" Huck said. "Oh, Tress! Are you all right?" He scampered off her shoulder and onto the vines.

She wiggled her fingers, then started laughing.

Tress's laugh was a silly thing, involving snorts and hiccups. It was an honest laugh, validated by its ridiculous nature.

In that moment, the last vestiges of Tress's spore fear died away. She'd made a mistake, and she *would* be careful in future experiments. But today, her mistake had merely cost her a little dignity—traded away for the pleasure of knowing what it felt like to be a grape trellis.

"In my bag," Tress said, still chuckling. "Fetch me the silver knife."

As Huck scrambled to obey, Tress noticed the ends of the vines were still growing. As before, when she thought about them, they turned toward her. In this particular case, she didn't want them to constrict her further, and so she thought of them pulling away. Remarkably, they did.

It wasn't perfect control. Plus, she couldn't do anything about the already grown vines and had to use the knife to cut herself free. But it left her wondering how far her control could go.

She carefully added more zephyr spores to each of her charges. The next experiments were less amusing. All three flew as she wanted, though one of the flares bounced free without releasing vines.

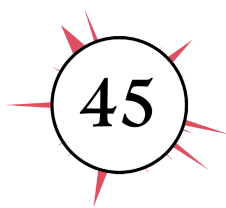
The other two exploded with vines just as she'd hoped. During the last experiment, she tried thinking about the vines as they grew, willing them to not grab onto anything. This time, instead of taking hold of the wall and the ribs of the ship, the vines stretched toward her—then the entire mass fell to the floor.

She spent the rest of the afternoon cutting the vines down and taking them up to dump out her window. She hid everything incriminating in her room with Huck—chastising herself for forgetting to lock the door on her way out earlier—and rushed to help Fort with the day's dinner. He found her a distracted helper, as her mind was elsewhere. Why had one of her flares failed to release vines? What if she fired a dud when she was facing Crow?

She'd need to do more testing before initiating a confrontation. But she finally had a weapon. A surprise.

Crow was looking for someone who didn't fear the spores. And that was just what she was going to get.

THE PROTECTOR



The captain authorized opening a keg of something intoxicating after dinner, which Tress considered a nice gesture. It proved the captain wasn't completely heartless. (Granted, that meant Crow *did* have a conscience, but ignored it most of the time. Which is verifiably worse.)

Tress did not partake of the brew. She'd only been drunk once in her life, two years before at a holiday gathering when she hadn't realized how much punch was in the punch. That day, she'd blathered endlessly about her favorite recipes. While Charlie had found it endearing, she worried a little alcoholic grease today might make her plans slip out as freely.

Instead she gathered up a plate of the night's meal: biscuits and a strong meaty gravy with vegetables. It was basically stew you ate with your fingers, but it at least gave the illusion of variety. There was only so much she could do with the ingredients at her disposal.

The crew loved it anyway. After months of meals that bore an uncomfortable kinship with tile grout, one did not complain at a little repetition on a delicious theme. And—though one might not believe it after experiencing the variegated ways the Dougs could assault a language—the crew was not stupid. They saw that Tress was helping Fort. And suddenly their meals contained food rather than something merely—by the strictest definition of the word—

edible. So when they cheered her as she left, it wasn't only because they were mildly inebriated.

She felt undeserving of this attention, particularly considering how her actions had put them all in such danger. So she hurried to Salay's cabin with a plate of food. Salay hadn't made an appearance at dinner, and Tress worried about her.

Tress knew the right door only because of the number on it; she'd never visited Salay. Tress knocked hesitantly, and thought she heard someone blow their nose on the other side. A moment later, Salay opened the door, and though her darker skin tone masked things like a red nose and cheeks, her eyes made it clear she'd been crying.

"Oh, Tress," Salay said, her voice as clipped and stern as always. "Is something wrong?"

"I brought you dinner," Tress said, uncomfortable. She'd never seen Salay in anything other than her naval outfit, with stiff trousers and coat. It felt wrong somehow to be barging in on her when she was wearing a robe over a nightgown.

Still, the woman gestured for Tress to enter and put the plate on the desk. Tress slipped in, shocked to discover how small the room was. It was barely half the size of her own quarters. As helmswoman, Salay was the ship's third in command. Surely she deserved more space than this closet.

"I appreciate the meal," Salay said. "It was inefficient of me to make you bring it. I need to maintain my strength, of course. Today only proved that more…"

She pushed past Tress and settled down at the desk, taking the plate. Tress wondered if she should go, but Salay kept speaking, so she lingered.

"I keep thinking there has to be a way to avoid the rains," Salay explained. She absently pushed the plate of food aside, then pointed at the unrolled chart on her desk. "There's no *pattern* to them though. People have sailed the seas for centuries, and *still* there is no known safe passage through the Crimson. If it hasn't been found by now…"

Salay stopped, then looked back at Tress. "You know of one, don't you? A way to protect the crew? You wouldn't have brought us here if you hadn't known of a method, right?"

"I…" Tress said, then swallowed. "I'm sorry, Salay. For what happened to Pakson."

“It’s my job to do what the captain and first officer cannot,” Salay said. “Or…or will not. Someone has to look out for the crew.” She pounded the table, then put her hand to her head, staring at the chart.

Tress settled down on the narrow bed beside the wall, sitting with her hands in her lap, feeling as if she were intruding. The room was remarkably bare of personalization. Some maps in tubes in a bin by the wall. Neat and organized chests for items under the bed. And a picture hanging above the porthole, lit by a flickering desk lamp.

It was a drawing; these people hadn’t discovered photography yet. But it was a good one, drawn expertly but quickly by a street artist in the zephyr capital. It depicted a tall, smiling man and a young girl who bore a striking resemblance to Salay.

“Your father?” Tress asked, pointing.

Salay looked up, then nodded. “I promised him I’d pay his creditors. But when I returned, he was gone. Pressed into labor by the king’s collectors. By the time I caught up to the ship, they’d left him at a debtor’s prison at some port, but couldn’t remember which one.”

“That’s awful.”

“Trouble is, when royal ships need an extra hand, they can always press men from the debtor’s prisons onto their crews. So tracking him proved impossible. He must have bounced around the islands, being pressed and dropped off a dozen times.

“I keep telling myself, and promising Mother via letter, that our only hope is for me to keep sailing. Keep visiting new ports and asking. He’s out there somewhere, Tress. Either that…or he died in one of the conflicts, forced onto the crew of a warship. If that’s the case, I guess I’m too late. I’ve already failed him, like I failed Pakson.”

“Salay,” Tress said, “you mustn’t give up hope.”

“Why not?” Salay asked, turning toward her. “Is it true? Do you have a way to get us out of this? Do you have a secret from the king that will let us survive the Crimson? Please. *Please* tell me you have a plan.”

“I…” What could she say? Did she try again to protest she wasn’t what Salay thought? Now, when she’d just told the woman to keep hope?

Hope in a lie—hope in me—is not true hope, Tress thought.

Unless she could do something. Unless there *was* a way to help.

Tress remembered with stark clarity watching the rains approach, knowing there was nothing she could do to stop them. Knowing her life was now subject to random chance.

She'd almost begun feeling like she was in control. Like she could shape her own destiny. Then the rain had come, a hammer sent by the moons to deliver humility to her via a firm blow to the forehead.

Salay turned away. "It's not fair of me to ask you to protect them, is it? I don't know your mission here, your *true* mission. It's possible your duty was simply to get us out of the kingdom. We had become deadrunners, dangerous to all we encountered. I can't blame you for steering us toward our deaths, to protect the innocent. I let it happen. I failed there too." She smoothed the edges of her map of the Crimson Sea. "If only we knew where the captain was taking us. Then at least I could plan for how long we'd be in here."

"Oh," Tress said. "Salay, I know that."

"You do?"

"Yes. Er, I should probably have told you earlier. The captain is taking us to see the dragon."

"Xisis?" Salay said, spinning again in her seat. "Is he *real*?"

"Ulaam says he is. And the captain has books that claim the legends are real."

"Well, Ulaam would probably know," Salay said, rubbing her chin. "But why visit the dragon… Oh, she's looking for a way out of her affliction, isn't she? I had assumed Crow was so stubborn, she'd bullied the spores in her blood to submit. She's lived longer than anyone should as a spore eater. But what would she trade…?"

They locked eyes.

"Oh," Salay said. Then she laughed. "She thinks you're going to let her trade *you* for her life? Ha!"

"Yes, um, it's very funny."

"Well, I suppose that's one thing to look forward to," Salay said. "It's going to be rich watching her discover what you really are. But tell me. I know you can't confirm or deny your true mission, but is there any hint you can give me for what to expect after Crow is dealt with?"

"Well," Tress said, "I will need your support. If I do deal with Crow—*if*—then I wouldn't want the crew to free her. I would need to…um…take her to face justice, you see."

"Of course!" Salay said, looking hopeful for the first time today.

“Yes, I can arrange that. Once you have her, we leave the Crimson, then?”

“Yes,” Tress said. “Though…well, this is a little awkward…but I have business with the Sorceress in the Midnight Sea next. And I was hoping…”

Salay’s eyes went wide. Then she laughed again. Her laugh was like a bell calling sailors to arms. Sharp, excited, yet somehow controlled. “Of course you do. Why was I worried? If you are going to sail the Midnight…well, dealing with the *Crimson* is nothing to someone like you.”

Then her expression turned more serious. “But could you help me protect the crew? I know a bunch of pirates are worthless to the king, but nobody else is going to look out for them. Even their captain doesn’t care about them. Please, *please* don’t let us lose another friend.”

In that moment, Tress felt like something Fort had cooked. Grimy, crusty, and barely able to fulfill its intended purpose. She shrank down before the weight of Salay’s hope. What could Tress do? She was a fake. A liar. A…

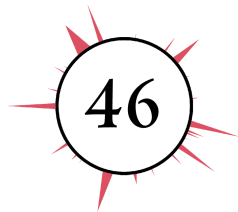
Wait.

A very strange, very desperate idea occurred to her. Probably nothing. Probably a useless whim.

Notably, strange desperation is exactly the state that often leads to genius.

“Be ready,” Tress told her. “There *is* something I can try.”

THE INFORMANT



Tress spent the next few days in a fervor of panicked studying and studious panicking. Her budding plan was far, far more dangerous than her work with the flares. And in this instance, she didn't have anyone else's schematics to lean upon.

She spent much of that time experimenting with verdant spores. The fruit of the Emerald Sea itself, which she'd never understood in her youth. She wasn't alone—nor was it surprising that the more she learned, the less afraid she had become. It is that way with most topics, as fear and knowledge often play on different sides of the net.

There are obviously exceptions. Certain individual humans, like certain sausages, break this convention. While neither larger group is collectively terrifying, they contain remarkable individuals that absolutely *should* frighten you. The more you learn about these individuals, the more worried you should become. But for humans at large, knowledge usually equates to empathy, and empathy leads to understanding.

Tress found verdant aether to be almost *playful*, eager to respond to her mental commands in exchange for water. Over the days of study, she grew proficient at making the vines grow in spirals, to stretch tall and strong, and even to grow slowly—holding back much of their strength.

She could feel, as always, a sensation beyond the vines. Nothing so distinct as a mind. An impression. One that she thought might be the moon itself—or the always-growing maternal vines that lived upon it.

Other than necessities like sleep, Tress only broke from her studies when she had to go help Fort prepare dinners. Each time, seeing the faces of the crewmembers made her more concerned.

Three days after her meeting with Salay, she sat in her chambers, encouraging a few verdant vines to grow delicately around her fingers without squeezing too hard. The ship was currently tacking in such a way that she could see the sporefall out her porthole. The sporefall had grown bigger and bigger with each passing day, and it had become increasingly obvious that this was the captain's destination. The dragon's lair must be near it. Or perhaps inside it.

It's not immediately obvious in most of the seas, but at the lunagree, falling spores make a pile—like the sand on the bottom of an hourglass. The sea was actually a mountain the size of a kingdom, though the incline was incredibly shallow, and therefore imperceptible. But the closer they sailed, the *higher* they needed to go.

Currently, items on Tress's desk were in danger of sliding off, and everything felt askew compared to the horizon—as if we were seeing through the lens of a student who had just discovered experimental film.

Huck periodically dripped more water onto the vines for her, using a small spoon and a cup of water (wooden, with a good smooth finish from long years of use) stuck to the desk with wax.

"What if," Tress said, "I learned to sail the ship *myself*."

"The entire ship?" Huck asked.

"Maybe not this one. A smaller one. Surely there are sailboats that a single person can crew. I could take one of those into the Midnight Sea, so I don't risk any other lives."

"And how long do you think it would take you to learn to sail on your own?" he asked. "Particularly in such dangerous seas? You could spend *years*."

"Maybe that's what I need to do."

"Or maybe," he said, "you need to acknowledge something far harder, Tress. That your friend is out of your reach. That you should give up on this quest and take care of yourself."

She didn't respond, though the anger she felt at his words

manifested in the vines tightening on her fingers—as if they too were frustrated.

She forced herself to relax as Huck dribbled another spoonful of water on the vines. He was getting better at balancing on two legs as he assisted her—he'd needed to do that far more often with her than he had in his past.

"Tress," he said, "I don't like to see you sad, but I'd *hate* to see you get hurt. What you've done here on the *Crow's Song* is incredible, but it's still *leagues* away from the dangers you'd face on the Midnight Sea."

"Is it? Nobody knows! I've asked Fort, Salay, and even Ulaam. They all tell me that the Midnight Sea is dangerous, but nobody can say why. They just know that the 'Sorceress watches' those spores. Ships that go there vanish. There's maybe something about monsters? Nobody can say for certain."

Huck dribbled more water. Then he sighed softly. "Remember how I went ashore at the last port?"

"How could I forget? You've told me six stories about it so far."

"I…left out the most important one."

Tress glanced up. The four vines curling around her fingers turned their tips, like heads, to regard Huck.

"I went looking for the rat population," Huck explained, setting down the spoon and wringing his paws. "There are some of us on most islands these days. Talking rats, I mean. With a little work, I found one who had visited the Sorceress's island. Before you ask, he didn't know the way. He simply happened to be on a ship that visited. But…he did relate to me the dangers they faced."

"And you weren't going to tell me?" Tress said, her four vines growing upward with a sharp, sudden motion, like spikes.

"I didn't want to encourage you!" Huck said. "I'm worried about you, Tress. But maybe if you know the dangers, you'll see how difficult it's going to be."

(Fun tip: Being told "I kept you in the dark to protect you" is not only frustrating, but condescending as well. It's a truly economical way to demean someone; if you're looking to fit more denigration into an already busy schedule, give it a try.)

Tress was able, with effort, to appreciate Huck's sentiment. And fortunately—like the girl who asked the suddenly quiet room of people if they wanted to see her tattoo—he realized that there was no turning back now.

“There are three trials one needs to face to reach the Sorceress,” Huck said. “I guess she likes things to be dramatic. Anyway, the first is the most obvious. You have to cross the Midnight Sea.”

“Which we can do,” Tress said, “now that Hoid has pointed out the way for us to go.”

“You know where to go, yes,” Huck said, “but Tress, don’t you understand? Rain falls in the Midnight Sea like everywhere else. The Sorceress has rigged up some way to continuously feed the creatures that pop out of the spores. They roam and rove the oceans—midnight monsters the size of ships. You remember that thing you created to watch Crow? You think you could fight a hundred of those attacking the ship?”

That…did seem daunting. The vines on Tress’s fingers wriggled down, hiding behind her palm.

“If you survive that,” Huck said, “you have to face the Sorceress’s guardians: a force of metal men that live on her island. They’re completely indestructible, impervious to all kinds of weapon fire, and are relentless.

“They capture anyone who sets foot on the island, then imprison them. Captives don’t even get to meet the Sorceress—so don’t think that’s a way to get her attention. I’m told she thinks anyone foolish enough to get captured by the guardians is beneath her notice.”

Huh. Getting captured on purpose had been one of the plans Tress was considering.

“And if you *somehow* escape them,” Huck said, “you’ll never reach the Sorceress. She lives in a tower made of an indestructible metal. It is so slick it cannot be scaled, and nothing will stick to it. She stands atop it in the evenings to commune with the moons, but there are only two ways in. Through doors locked by mysterious means, or through the small window where her ravens travel in and out, doing her bidding.

“Tress, if you attempt to go to that island, you’ll get eaten by Midnight Essence monsters. If by some miracle you survive and make it to the island, you’ll get locked away forever by the guardians. And even if you escape them, you’ll end up sitting in front of the tower and screaming to be heard until you lose your voice. There’s *no way* to accomplish what you want.”

“Hoid did it,” she said. “He saw her. And so did Charlie.”

“Charlie,” Huck said, “was specifically kidnapped because she hoped to be able to ransom him to the king! Who knows what

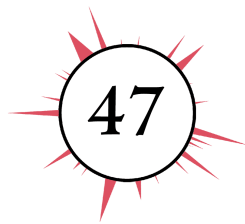
happened with Hoid. It could have been the same thing."

She sat back, and to some extent Huck's information did as he hoped. It revealed exactly how difficult her task was.

Well, she couldn't focus on it at the moment. She had other problems to deal with. She wouldn't be around to get cursed by the Sorceress if she ended up imprisoned by a dragon first. And she'd never have a chance to be imprisoned by a dragon if she was killed by rainfall on the Crimson.

So, Tress returned to her practice with the vines.

THE POET



The flare burst at Ulaam's feet. A writhing, twisting mass of vines subsumed the surgeon, wrapping him all the way up to his neck. He tried to free himself, but the best he could achieve was a cross between a convulsion and a dry heave.

"What do you think?" Tress said, hurrying through the hold to stand next to him. "Will it work to capture Crow?"

Ulaam struggled to shrug. "From my understanding of her ailment and her powers, this should be sufficient. Her vines intercept physical danger, but they don't care if she's immobilized. Their needs and hers do not entirely align, hmmm? So long as she keeps living to provide them with water, they don't care what happens to her."

"Do you think it's overkill?" Tress asked. "If what you say is true, we could jump her in the night while she's sleeping."

"Her vines would *surely* react to that," Ulaam said. "The spores inside her have no way of judging your intent. They would assume the worst and fight you off.

"The brilliance of this mechanism you've devised is that you don't have to fire it directly at the captain. The vines will judge your shot off-target, and therefore might not respond. Once she's wrapped tight, be certain not to make any threatening moves, and the spores should be satisfied."

“Thank you,” Tress said. “Oh! Let me get you out.” She reached for her silver knife.

“No need,” Ulaam said. “This is quite pleasant. Tell me, where did you find those flares?”

“I made them,” Tress said, digging through her bag—which was on the floor of the hold near where I was sitting. She’d taken the chance to explain her plan in detail to Ulaam and me.

I had, of course, responded by asking what she thought of my mullet.

Please stop trying to imagine that. It would be best for both of us.

“You made them?” Ulaam said. “Yourself?”

“I had some of Weev’s schematics, explaining how cannonballs worked,” she explained. “It wasn’t so hard to extrapolate.”

“Remarkable. I say, young lady, I *must* have your brain. Once you are through with it, naturally. Hmmmm?”

“I’m sorry, Ulaam,” she said as she hunted in her bag. Where had she put her notebook? She wanted to record that this design worked better than her previous one. Ten shots, and so far no duds. “Talk like that still makes me queasy.”

“You haven’t the nerves of a pirate yet, I’m afraid.”

“I know.”

“I could insert some. It’s a thirty-five percent agony-free process!”

“No thank you,” she said, pulling out the notebook and turning. She jumped as she found Ulaam standing next to her. The vines lay in a heap where he’d been standing.

“How?” she asked.

“I digested them,” he explained, “in a few key places.”

“…Digested?” Tress asked.

“He’s extra gross!” I said. “I envy him.”

“As you should, my friend,” Ulaam said. “By definition, I can do anything a human can—plus more. I see you are taking notes on your experiments, Tress. Interesting, interesting. You know, I could certainly—”

“My *brain* is *not* for *sale*,” Tress said.

“I was going to ask about your hands this time. Such excellent penmanship. My, my.” He smiled, showing a literally inhuman number of teeth. He says he does it because he figures an extra big smile should be extra comforting to humans. I can never tell if he’s joking or not.

“Hands,” she said. “Not for sale. Nor my knees. Or my ears. No

body parts for sale, Ulaam. Ever."

"Well, that's quite definitive," he said. "You've grown rather forceful, hmmmm? I remember when you first arrived, and you seemed embarrassed to turn me down."

"I'm not any different now. I'm simply more desperate."

"More desperate than those first few days on the ship?" he asked.

Tress hesitated, thinking back to those first awful days. Well, yes, she'd been desperate then too. She'd *assumed* herself to be as desperate as was possible.

Perhaps it was like lifting weights—her capacity for desperation was increasing with time. And there just wasn't room for other emotions, like embarrassment.

"Regardless," Ulaam said, "we shall move on. No more offers for now. Your plan with the captain. You're certain the others will join you in this mutiny?"

"Pretty sure," Tress said. "I…may have led Salay and the other officers to think I am a King's Mask…"

"Oh my," Ulaam said. "How did you manage that?"

"Accidentally," Tress said with a grimace. "Somehow I seem to be best at lying when I tell the truth."

"Wise words, wise words," I said. "But tell me, have you heard my latest poem?"

"Excuse me," Ulaam said, "I'm disconnecting my ears for the next two minutes."

"What?" Tress said. Unfortunately, she was limited by her anatomy. She couldn't disconnect *her* ears unless she wanted it to be permanent.

"There once was a farmer with a tulip bulb," I said. "Who had nowhere to plant it. He found a place to sit. He then threw a fit. And accidentally mashed it into pulp. The end."

Oh, gods.

Oh, Shards within.

What had I become?

"That's…nice," Tress said. And for a girl who claimed she was bad at lying, she pulled that one off swimmingly.

Ulaam returned to sensibility a short time later. "Ah!" he said. "You're not bleeding from your ears, Tress? Remarkable. Is that all you'll be needing from me today?"

"I suppose," Tress said. "But…are you sure you won't help? In our mutiny?"

“Alas,” Ulaam said. “I can offer only medical attention, should you require it. More interference would not be proper.”

“If we don’t get out of the Crimson soon,” Tress said, “the ship could end up sinking. That would kill you too.”

“Assumptions, assumptions,” Ulaam said, walking to the steps. “Hoid is immortal, and I am nearly so. While I don’t relish the idea of walking across the bottom of the spore sea to reach safety—particularly with him tagging along in his current state—that is not outside my abilities.”

I stood up to go after him, as a part of me—that piece that was slightly self-aware—kept trying to ambush him with bad poems.

I stopped next to Tress, however, who now sat with her flare gun in her lap. Staring at the floor. Outside, the soft hiss of spores rubbing along the hull was a steady companion. A reminder that we were moving inevitably toward the dragon’s lair.

Captain Crow estimated it was only two days away.

“I’m worried,” Tress said softly, looking up at me. “I’m…I’m terrified.”

I put my hand on her shoulder and managed to keep myself from vomiting forth another poem. She must have seen something in my eyes, the fragment of lucidity I still possessed.

“I’m terrified,” she repeated. “Not only for everyone else, though I do feel that. I’m scared for myself and what Crow is going to do to me. I can’t beat her. Deep down, I *know* it.”

I raised my other hand, lifting a single finger. “You have,” I whispered, “everything you need, Tress.”

“The flare gun? But what if I fail?”

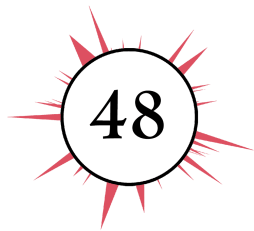
“You have *everything* you need.” I squeezed her on the arm, then started up after Ulaam. Then I slowed. Something was wrong, wasn’t it? Other than the fact that I wasn’t currently launching into an epic ode to the beauty of calluses?

Oh. The hissing on the hull had stopped. The seethe had paused, and the ship was slowing. Well, nothing to worry about there. That happened all the time, and wasn’t dangerous.

Unless rain was near.

You can probably guess what happened next.

THE NIGHTMARE



I have nightmares. My unique state of being doesn't prevent that, though I don't need sleep nearly as much as ordinary humans do.

My worst recurring nightmare—the one that grabs me by the throat and shakes me until I wake, raw and steaming in my own sweat—is not that I am being chased by a monster. It's not that I'm lost, or that I'm unloved.

No, my greatest nightmare is the one where I learn I've been repeating myself for years, telling the same tired jokes, the same stories—energetically wearing a path through people's patience and fondness until even the weeds upon it are dead.

So I'll refrain from repeating my suspicions and fears regarding the rains upon the Crimson. But if ever there were proof that Fate herself had placed long odds against the *Crow's Song*, it would be the fact that there were not one, but *two* separate rainlines heading straight for the ship.

Two at once. With the ship dead on the slopes of the vast crimson mountain, prow pointed toward the column of particles streaming from the angry moon.

When Tress reached the upper deck, she saw Salay standing on the quarterdeck, holding firm at her post in case the seethe began again and she had a chance to steer them to safety. The ship remained still, damningly so. All her skill, all her passion, meant

nothing when the ship was sporelocked. She was helpless.

Dougs shouted ideas at one another, several suggesting they run across the spores to safety. That was, of course, stupidity. If the ship were destroyed, they'd die the moment the seethe began again. There were two lifeboats, yes, but what would that offer? Slow death by dehydration. They were upon the Crimson. Few sailed here.

With very, *very* good reason.

Salay looked past the Dougs and met Tress's eyes.

It's time, she mouthed. *Please.*

Tress grabbed one of the Dougs, a lanky woman with her hair in a long tail. "Go to Salay!" Tress shouted at her. "Tell her I need two very long ropes and the barrel of water from the cannon station. Go! *Go!*"

Tress went running for her room, shoving past Laggart on the steps. He bellowed after her, but she wasn't of a mind to listen. She had minutes, maybe, until the rain arrived and their story ended. Unless Tress could add another chapter through sheer force of will.

Heroism is a remarkable thing, oft misunderstood. We all think we understand it because we want to see its seed inside ourselves. That is part of the secret, really.

If you gather together stories of heroes—those who have risked their lives for others, those who have stood against overwhelming odds, those who have barreled heedlessly into danger with the aplomb of a champion diver leaping from the highest platform—you find patterns. Two of them, in fact.

The first is that heroes can be trained. Not by a government or a military, but by the people themselves. Heroes are the ones who have *thought* about what they're going to do, and who have trained to do it. Heroism is often the seemingly spontaneous result of a lifetime of preparation.

But if you ask these heroes why they risked their lives, don't do it on a stand in front of a crowd while you give them their medal. Because the truth is, they likely didn't do it for their country. Or even for their ideals. Consistently, across cultures, eras, and ideologies, war heroes report the same simple motivation. They did it for their friends.

In the frenzied anarchy of destruction, loyalty to causes and kingdoms alike tends to fall to the chaos. But the bond between people, well, that's stronger than steel. If you want to create heroes,

don't give them something to fight for. Give them some*one* to fight for.

Tress unlocked the door to her quarters and slammed it open, sending Huck scrambling under the bed. She rushed to her desk, where she found a large ball of roseite, grown and shaped over the last few days. It was the size of a child's head and was waxed on the outside, and it was filled with an enormous charge of verdant spores, colored faintly violet by the roseite around it.

Tress barely had time to note that she'd apparently spilled a couple midnight spores on the desk, a sloppy move on her part. She heaved the roseite "cannonball" off the desk, then dashed out into the hallway.

On the deck, the Dougs had gathered around Salay. Captain Crow was out of her cabin, standing on the quarterdeck and drinking from her canteen with an air of fatalism. She had hoped not to die here, of course, but she was already terminal. There was only so much a new form of demise could move the proverbial needle, once you've stared down your own mortality every day for over a year.

Salay broke through the Dougs and gestured to the rope and the barrel of water. "We got it, Tress. What now?"

"Tie one rope to the barrel," Tress said, "and lower it *carefully* over the side to the spores." She took a deep breath. "Then tie the other rope around me and do the same."

Everyone in the group turned, pointedly, and stared at her.

Then Salay barked orders, and the crew saw it done. Ann personally lowered the barrel, while Fort and a few Dougs gingerly lowered Tress. She touched down, feeling again the soft scrunch of spores beneath her feet. Being so close to the Crimson, she felt as if she'd stumbled upon some mythological land where the ground had somehow rusted and the sky looked a strange cast of blue by contrast.

Spores ground against wood in a familiar sound as the barrel touched down beside her. Ann waved from above, and dozens of eyes followed Tress as she untied the barrel and rolled it up next to the hull of the ship.

Then she pried off the top—her hands trembling—and stared at the dark water. What she was about to do went against everything she'd ever been told.

"The rain is almost here, Tress!" Salay shouted from above. "Oh, moons. It's coming!"

Tress could hear the crunching and clattering of the crimson spores as they grew in a frenzy. Like thousands of raised spears. Trembling, she reached into the pocket of her red coat and removed a spike, tipped with silver. With her other hand, she held the roseite cannonball.

Grab hold, she thought. *Just grab. Don't destroy the barrel. Out, then grab.*

With the spike, she drilled a hole into the top of the sphere, revealing the green spores within. Then she dropped it into the barrel.

Vines *exploded* forth, thick as arms, spiraling around one another. A small charge of verdant could create enough vines to entangle a person—and she'd packed this with many, many times that. Tentacles surged out of the barrel and slammed against the ship. Drinking eagerly of the water, the vines continued to grow, thicker, stronger.

The twisting, fulminating mass shoved the *Crow's Song,* tipping it and causing the crew to shout. Tress initially backed away, but no. No, she'd made this. She couldn't run from it. She was *part* of it.

She pressed both hands against the still-growing vines, feeling the taut verdant—like sinew—undulate beneath her fingers. *Up,* she thought. *Please, PLEASE.*

UP.

The ship rocked further. Then it began to rise into the air. The mass of verdant vines reoriented and *lifted,* like a many-fingered hand. Without the seethe, the ocean surface was a sturdy enough footing, so long as the vines—having fully burst from the barrel—spread out.

The rising motion caught Tress, who was still tied around the chest by the rope. She spared a moment to hope that Fort wouldn't let go of her, but kept most of her attention on the growing vines. For she could hear the rain getting closer, announcing itself with the sound of water pelting something hard: the snarls of crimson spines they created, then bathed.

I've talked to many a sailor, and this—across dozens of worlds—was *their* nightmare. The sound of the rain, the howl of the wind, and the embrace of the abyss. On Tress's world, it's not the water below that is the danger, but the water above. However, the nightmare is the same, born of the sure knowledge that the very thing you sail, the very thing that carries you and gives your life

meaning, will someday try to kill you.

Twin streams of rain intersected at the *Crow's Song*, washing the deck clean of dead spores, soaking the sailors—from the lowest cabin boy to the captain in her plumed hat. Nightmare manifest. A ship caught alone in a storm, rain making a thunder on the wood.

In every story, warning, and song, this meant death.

Except that day. On that ship.

Crow waited for the awful moment—waited for the spikes to shred her ship from all sides, impaling her crew, snapping boards. It never happened. She only felt the rain, hitting like a thousand tiny punches. The water was colder than she'd imagined.

Dougs crowded the side of the ship, and Crow pushed her way through, cursing for them to make room. What was going on? She'd seen Tress go over the side and had assumed she was running, though to where she had no idea. The ship had rocked, yes, but…

She didn't understand until she looked down and found a colossal *tree* had grown under the ship. That was the only word to properly define it: a tree made of interweaving vines. A spreading finger-fan of vine-roots braced it, and vine-branches had latched onto the *Crow's Song*.

The tree had lifted the ship some forty feet into the air—right above the thicket of spikes that had grown beneath. The spikes had pierced the trunk, but verdant vines were elastic. And besides, they had still been growing. If anything, the network of spikes helped *stabilize* the vines.

Hanging over the side of the ship, dangling from the rope that Fort held firm, was a shivering, soaking-wet girl, her face hidden behind a mess of damp hair.

It was then that, belatedly, the Dougs started cheering. I don't blame their delayed reaction. They'd gone from certainly dead to very much alive, and that kind of existential whiplash requires a few heartbeats—thumping in your ears to tell you yes, this was real—to recover from.

"Help us pull her up, you louts!" Salay said, grabbing the rope with Fort. He stood with one foot against the rail, holding the rope with hands that—though crooked—were as solid as bricks. His quick thinking—hauling Tress up a few feet as the vines grew—had saved the girl's life. As it was, the tips of the crimson spikes had touched her shoes.

Everyone helped haul Tress up, and doubtless many of them were

thinking of how they'd done this once before—weeks ago when they'd first brought her on board. They cheered again as Fort lifted her gingerly onto the deck.

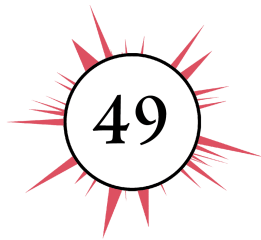
Crow watched it all, silent. She didn't dare say anything in the face of such a remarkable salvation. Indeed, the vines didn't appear to have harmed the ship at all. With the silver-edged axes, the Dougs would be able to loosen the vessel, then cut them free once the seethe returned and the tree sank. They'd practiced it as a way to escape being tangled up during a cannon battle.

So Crow wasn't worried about the ship. Or about reaching the dragon, as the lair was very close now. She'd told everyone that their destination was two days away, as she didn't want them to panic, thinking she'd take them into the sporefall itself. That wouldn't be necessary.

Today, Crow's fear was of a completely different breed. For though she had spent her entire life instilling fear in her crew so they would obey her, she knew there was another emotion that made people even *more* loyal. Unfortunately, it was an emotion she had never truly understood.

And if Crow had a nightmare, it was standing before her now. In the form of a small shivering girl who had somehow earned the love that Crow had never known.

THE MARTYR



A few hours later, Tress sat in the quartermaster's office with Fort, Salay, and Ann—who conversed in hushed tones.

Tress said very little, instead holding a cup (her one with the butterfly) with tea from Fort's personal store. It said a great deal that he hadn't even *mentioned* a trade as he handed it to her. What Tress had done for them all had incurred a debt Fort feared he'd never pay off.

He *did* intend to try nevertheless.

We have to act quickly, he wrote. **If what Tress says is true, and the captain is planning to trade her to the dragon, we haven't much time. Crow said our destination was only two days away.**

"She said that this morning," Ann agreed. "I can guess we ate up a good chunk of that today, before the rainfall."

Tress sipped the tea. She hadn't stopped trembling since the event, and she actually liked that this tea was warm. It chased the chill from her soul.

Outside, the calming sound of spores on wood had resumed. Though she'd feared her stunt would cause permanent damage to the ship, the crew had efficiently cut the vines free once the seethe returned. The trunk had been pulled into the depths by the spines of the many crimson aethers, leaving the *Crow's Song* to float serenely

onward.

Was it odd that Tress felt *guilty* about using the aether tree, then abandoning it? Would the aethers be sad down there? What happened to the ones that sank, anyway?

Perhaps instead of ruminating on such things, she should have been more worried about her looming date with a dragon. She just felt so bare, like a broom worn by good work down to its last few bristles. Following the tension of the day, she found it difficult to summon more fear.

"Then we need to strike," Salay said from beside the door. "Tomorrow morning. Are we agreed?"

"Agreed," Ann said.

Yes,> Fort said, holding up his board. **With a King's Mask on our side, we cannot fail.**

They looked to Tress. She wished she could wither away before their expectations. They could use her flaking soul to brew some more tea.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Tress said softly.

"What?" Ann said. "Girl, she's going to *trade you*."

"I'm not losing another crewmember," Salay said.

Fort studied her, thoughtful.

"The crew is alive by a miracle," Tress said. "I'm worried about what will happen to you if we try to fight Crow. She's dangerous. I feel it."

So you'd let her trade you? Fort said. **Willingly?**

"It's not death to serve a dragon," Tress said. "I don't think so, at least. And maybe I can find a way to escape. Or…or buy my freedom…"

She knew she wasn't making much sense. She'd spent frantic days trying to devise a weapon against the captain. Tress *did* want to escape. And really, shouldn't she feel excited? Optimistic? Her plan to save the *Crow's Song* had worked, after all.

But lies have a way of diluting a person. The longer you live them, the more you become a bucket of mixed paint, steadily veering toward generic brown. That has never stopped me, mind you, but I'm not the person Tress was.

"We can't lose to Crow," Salay said, "as long as we have you, Tress. You're a—"

"I'm not, Salay," Tress said, exhausted. "I'm not a King's Mask. I didn't even know what one was until you mentioned them to me."

She shook her head. “Please believe me.”

They didn’t, of course. A boring truth will always have difficulty competing with an exciting lie.

“Look, Tress,” Ann said, “you think our problems will go away once the cap’n has talked to the dragon? We’ll still be under her thumb.”

“You’d be able to fight her,” Tress said. “She won’t have the spores to protect her. If you let her trade me, you have a much better chance of succeeding.”

Fort rested his hand on hers, then tipped his sign toward her. **But we’d have to live with it, Tress. Crow forced us into this life. We didn’t know she intended to kill. But if we don’t stand up to her now, we don’t get to use that excuse anymore. We know what she is now.**

Tress read the words through twice. And…though her first instinct was still to protest…something else was growing. She’d have called it arrogance, and it frightened her. But arrogance and self-worth are two sides to a coin, and it will spend either way.

That day, she met Fort’s eyes and nodded. “All right.”

“Mutiny,” Salay said. “Tomorrow morning. I’ll make certain the Dougs are with us.”

“I’ll distract Laggart,” Ann said. “If I’m firing the cannon, he’ll come scold me again.”

I have a key to the captain’s quarters, Fort said. **She doesn’t know. We will go in while she’s asleep and take her captive. Then we sail for the Verdant Sea and turn her in to the king’s officials in exchange for our lives.**

Tress took a deep breath. “Capturing her won’t be that easy, Fort. The spores inside her will react to someone trying to restrain her. Fortunately, I’ve devised a weapon that might work. It…”

What was that?

“It…”

Tress shivered. She felt something. A familiar itch, distinct as the scent of her mother’s bread. Without thinking, she reached to the side, into the shadows underneath the overhang of Fort’s counter.

Some of the darkness there resisted her fingers. It felt like a filled waterskin.

Midnight Essence.

Tress felt another mind controlling it, but it was distant and she was near. Working by instinct, she seized control. Immediately her

tongue felt dry. She coughed, and—panicking—somehow severed the connection completely. The Midnight Essence puffed away, becoming dark smoke.

That other mind.

That had been Crow.

Crow had been listening to them with Midnight Essence.

"Oh…oh *moons*," Tress rasped. "Crow knows."

THE MURDERER

The ship's bell rang a series of unceasing sharp notes.

"All hands on deck," Ann said. "How…how could she know, Tress?"

"Spores," Tress said. "It's hard to explain."

The bell continued to ring, and each peal seemed a threat: Die. Die. Die.

"What do we do?" Ann asked. "She'll execute us, same as she did with Weev."

"We fight," Salay said. "We were going to do it tomorrow. We'll have to start early. Tress, you said you have a weapon we can use?"

Though she wanted nothing more than to sleep, Tress nodded. They were committed now. She stood and threw open the door, intending to run down the hallway to her room to get the flare gun. However, as soon as she opened the door, she found a pistol leveled at her forehead.

"Well now," Laggart said, "captain wants to see you four most of all. How…convenient to find you all together."

Tress's trembling returned, then redoubled, trying to make up for lost time. She stared down the barrel of that gun and found her mouth had gone dry again, for a different reason. She forced out some words anyway.

"You can't hurt me," she said. "Captain needs me."

“True, I’m afraid,” Laggart said. Then he turned the gun and shot Salay in the thigh.

Ann screamed and Fort lunged forward to try to grab Laggart—but he stopped short when he saw a second pistol pointed right at him.

“Captain didn’t say anything about bringing the other three of you up alive,” Laggart said. “So now, Fort. Can you read what I’m saying, or does the gun speak loudly enough for you?”

The large man froze, but Ann ignored the gun, kneeling and using her handkerchief to bind Salay’s wound.

Tress felt helpless. Ann finished the binding, but then looked up, uncertain. They needed Ulaam. It was bleeding so much…

“Up on deck,” Laggart said to them, backing away and gesturing toward the steps. A few gawking Dougs hurried past, feet thumping on the wood.

“She’s bleeding!” Tress said.

“Not as much as she would be with another hole in her,” Laggart said. “*Up.*”

Fort gently pushed Ann to the side, then lifted Salay, who put her arms around his neck. She nodded to Tress, grimacing at the pain. Ann glared at Laggart, her hands bloody. He just smiled and wagged the pistol’s tip.

Reluctantly, Tress led the way, and the five of them emerged on deck. The Crimson Moon hung ominous in the night sky, pouring spores down in a vast haze—like the misty sheet of rain you might get beneath clouds on another planet. Here, the bright moonlight made them shimmer like tiny drops of glistening blood.

Crow stood framed beneath the moon, her shadow breaking the red light. Dougs gathered on either side of the deck, leaving an open space in the center for the captain—and the four mutineers. Fort settled Salay down, and she held a firm hand on her bound wound. The other three huddled around her. Laggart came up behind them, then climbed up onto the quarterdeck where he had a good view of—and line of sight on—all of them.

“So,” Crow said, “you lot want to take my ship away from me, do you? Mutiny against your own?”

None of the four responded.

“Honestly,” Crow said, “I didn’t think you had it in you—considering how I had to force you lot into this life.” She waved, and a Doug hurried forward, setting a small table onto the deck

between them.

"I'm impressed," Crow said, slipping a pistol out of her belt and setting it on the table. A second followed. Then a third. "Consider me a…proud parent. But it makes me wonder. How many on this ship truly respect their captain?"

Fort was watching his board. He tapped a few words on the back.

No one respects you, Crow. They do what you say because they fear the spores in your blood.

"Now, I thought you were the smart one, Fort," Crow said. "It's not the spores they fear. It's *me*. Isn't that right, crew?" She scanned the Dougs, most of whom backed away beneath her glare. "I do have to hand it to you, Tress. I—"

"Hand?" Dr. Ulaam said, perking up at the back of the crowd. "I have—"

"Shut up, Ulaam," Crow growled, not turning toward him. She kept Tress's eyes. "I knew I'd eventually have to deal with Salay, maybe Fort. But you gave me all of them in a neat package, with proof of their treachery." She gestured toward the table. "Well, let's get on with it. An old-fashioned duel. Three pistols. The four of you—well, three, as I see Salay is grappling with the result of her arrogance—against me."

"Hardly fair," Ann said. "Your spores will stop any bullets we fire at you."

"Don't fire them at me then," Crow said, gesturing toward the quarterdeck. "Kill Laggart before I deal with the three of you, and I'll step down as captain."

"Captain?" Laggart said, stepping to the edge of the rail.

"Put your pistol away, Laggart," Crow shouted. "And stand there like a good target."

"But…" He trailed off as he realized that yes, she *was* that callous. He slowly put away his pistol.

"Well?" Crow said. "This wasn't a negotiation. I'm not making an offer. It's an ultimatum."

Fort moved first, leaping for the guns. Crow kicked the leg out from the table—scattering the weapons to the deck—then surged forward and *slammed* her elbow into Fort's face. Tress had never heard anything quite like the *crunch* that made. The sharp crack of breaking cinnamon sticks mixed with the dull thud of tenderizing a gull's breast.

The sound shocked her, made her acknowledge what was

happening. She'd been in a daze, but now she leaped for the deck, trying to snatch one of the guns. In the chaos, she lost track of what was happening—though I had an excellent view. Crow vaulted over Fort as he held his face, then slapped Salay's hand—she'd tried crawling to one of the guns.

Crow snatched up that pistol, then nonchalantly tossed it overboard. She spun around and rammed her fist into Tress's stomach, throwing her full weight and momentum into the swing. Tress's breath, drive, and hope were rammed forcibly out her mouth as she crumpled around the fist.

There's no hands-off way to prepare to take a punch. No conceptual training, no schoolhouse theory. When you get hit, yes, a part of you panics. But a bigger part of you is dumbfounded. The mind cannot *accept* that such a thing could happen, for nothing in life has prepared it for such brutality. It's hard to internalize the truth that someone was actually willing to hurt you—even murder you.

That is an edge a person like Crow will always have over others. Her mind accepts these facts easily. She will hurt, and she will kill. She enjoys both.

She was grinning madly as she grabbed the table and slammed it into Fort's face. It didn't break, like they sometimes do in stories of bar fights. It was good solid wood, and it *thumped* against his arms —which were sheltering his broken nose—and sent him sprawling.

Crow tossed the second gun overboard, then looked for the third. It was in Ann's hands, pointed at Laggart.

Crow's grin widened, then she gestured as if to say, "Be my guest."

Laggart started to back away.

"Leave your post, Cannonmaster," Crow said, "and I'll shoot you myself. Think very carefully about which bullet you'd rather risk."

He remained in place. Ann's arm started to shake. She looked at Crow and saw a woman with nothing to lose. In that moment Ann was the smart one, because she realized that no matter what she did —whether she hit or not—Crow wasn't going to let herself lose this fight. She'd go back on her word if she had to. What were the Dougs going to do? Tell the king's marshals?

But at least if she shot Laggart, they would have one fewer enemy to worry about. Ann steadied her arm. She aimed. She fired.

And she missed by at least half a boat length.

Crow laughed, then shoved Ann aside. The scrappy woman came back up with a knife and death in her eyes.

Crow chuckled and slipped something from her pocket. A stubby gun with a very wide barrel.

Tress's flare gun.

Through the tears in her eyes—still stunned from the punch—Tress saw the captain fire it and hit Ann in the chest. The flare connected with a thump, and her body cushioned the trigger enough to prevent it from going off. So it fell to the deck, and there—hitting tip-down—it released its explosion of vines to wrap around Ann.

"For cheating," the captain said, tucking the flare gun away. She absently slammed her heel into Salay's wounded leg, making the woman scream in pain. Crow checked on Fort last—his face was a mess of blood, and he still seemed dazed.

After making sure he wasn't going to come up swinging, Crow walked over to where he'd dropped his strange magical writing board. Her heel took this next, snapping it in half with a crunch.

Fort cried out. It was the only time I've heard him speak, other than to laugh. It was a mournful cry full of primal human grief. He slumped forward, putting bloody hands to bloody face, heaving as he sobbed.

Tress finally understood Crow's purpose. Killing the four of them might have inspired rebellion among the Dougs; she'd learned from her execution of Weev. Death made martyrs. Humiliation made servants.

The Dougs lowered their eyes when she scanned the deck. Fort's sorrow turned silent and personal. The ship fell quiet—but it wasn't the quiet of a night of falling snow. It was the quiet of a hospital room after a loved one died.

Crow had defeated the four best officers on the ship, and hadn't even *needed* her strange spore blood. Ulaam was surprised it hadn't manifested, he told me later. Crow had better control of her ailment than any of us had realized. She'd purposefully kept the vines in, so no one would wonder later whether she was less dangerous without them.

There would be no crossing the captain again after today.

"Cannonmaster," Crow barked. "Lower anchor."

"Captain?" Laggart said. "But you said we needed to keep sailing to reach the lair…"

“We’ve arrived.”

“But—”

“A quick piece of advice, Laggart,” Crow said. “If you suspect mutiny, always tell people the trip will end a few days after it actually will. Human nature compels cowards to wait until the last possible moment before they try anything.”

The anchor went down with a rattle of its chain. Crow wasn’t bluffing—we’d gotten close enough, though there wasn’t a precise location one needed to reach to get the dragon’s attention. You simply needed to be within the region he watched. Crow proved this by tossing a letter overboard, held in the traditional glass case, as her books instructed.

Then she hauled Tress to her feet, restraining the girl by means of a death grip on her shoulder. “You,” Crow said, “are going to go with me quietly and willingly, or I’ll have Laggart start executing your friends. This is another ultimatum.”

Tress nodded, because she still hadn’t gotten her breath back. Her first real fight, and she’d lasted exactly one punch. Her eyes were *still* watering, her stomach aching. She felt useless—at least until she saw Salay looking at her.

Then Tress felt worthless instead.

Salay was holding her thigh, where blood was seeping through the makeshift bandage. Through her pain, she was looking to Tress, pleadingly.

Tress turned away.

At that moment, Salay finally understood. She finally believed. “You were never one, were you?”

“No,” Tress whispered. “I…tried to tell you…”

Salay slumped to the deck, defeated.

Beyond the ship, the spores began to undulate, then spin in a whirlpool as if draining from below. The Dougs and I rushed to the side, watching as a large tunnel appeared in the spores, the sides of it solid despite the seethe. It led down into darkness. Xisis had received the message.

“Prepare the launch,” Crow shouted. Once the small rowboat was ready, hanging beside the deck, she forced Tress in.

Crow climbed in next and nodded to Laggart, who held a pistol on Ann. “If we don’t come back in an hour,” Crow shouted, “kill one of them.”

Tress slumped down into her seat. Then she felt a hand on her

shoulder. She looked to see me reaching across the railing to her.

"You still have," I whispered, "everything you need."

I backed away at a bark from the captain, and the Dougs lowered the boat like a makeshift elevator to get them down to sea level.

Crow pushed Tress in front as they stepped out onto the strangely firm spores, then started down into the tunnel.

THE DRAGON

The spore seas aren't that deep, relatively speaking. Compared, for example, to the depth of the Lilting Abyss on Threnody, the spore seas are practically ponds.

But when you have to *hike* to the bottom—all the while being cuffed and shoved by an impatient pirate with a terminal disease—a few hundred yards can feel far, far longer. Nonetheless, it did beat the traditional method of reaching the bottom of an ocean.

Crow carried a lantern, and the way the light glistened off the crimson tunnel made it seem as if they were climbing down the dragon's own gullet. Tress wondered what would happen if the stiff walls were exposed to water. Would spikes grow out of them, or did the dragon's strange power prevent the aether from expressing itself? It says more than I could ever explain about the changes in Tress that she briefly considered licking the wall, just to see.

Eventually the tunnel leveled out, then opened into a vast chamber—also made completely out of solidified spores. Tress had been expecting to reach the bottom and find out what was down there. Was it stone, soil, or merely piles and piles of aether spines sunken from thousands of years of rain? She supposed she would have a lifetime down here to learn.

That was when the true weight of it all hit her. She'd spend her *life* down here. She had failed Charlie. Equally bad, and somehow

more terrifying in the moment, she might never see the moons again. The prospect of never again seeing the sky, never again feeling the sunlight, never being bathed in the Verdant Moon's glow…it made her knees grow weak.

Crow shoved her forward anyway, causing Tress to stumble into the vast crimson chamber, then fall to her knees. She choked back her emotions, as tears could be fatal if those spores could indeed express their aethers. But she couldn't help curling up, trembling. For a time, she was insensate to Crow's cursing, even her none-too-gentle kicks.

It was all so very much to carry. The weight of the day's emotions stacked upon Tress in a heap, heavy as the ocean itself. Had it only been earlier that afternoon when she'd felt vibrant, relieved, and triumphant as she was pulled up through the rain?

Could a day contain too many moments? Yes, the hours and minutes had been the same today as every day, but each of the moments inside had been fat, like a wineskin filled to bursting. Tress felt as if she were going to leak it all out, vomit emotion all over the place—there wasn't enough Tress to contain it.

You still have everything you need…

Did he mean the flare gun? Crow was carrying that, wasn't she? But Tress could not best Crow in a physical contest; she had conclusive empirical evidence of that.

"On your feet, girl," Crow said, hauling her up, then shoving her forward.

The chamber ahead of them appeared empty, save for enormous spore columns wrapped in black ribbons of cloth. Braziers burned at the corners—revealing a large corridor leading away to the right—but they didn't completely dispel the chamber's darkness. Indeed, shadow dominated, as if the lights existed only by its forbearance.

"Dragon?" Crow called, her voice echoing. "I have come, as stipulated, with the proper sacrifice! Show yourself!"

The word "dragon" has filtered its way into nearly every society I've visited, but unlike the name "Doug," this wasn't the result of natural linguistics. Rather, the dragons have made certain that they are known and remembered—a feat often accomplished by interacting with said societies during their formative years.

Like a child learning her name, cultures learn to respect and fear the dragons. It's a matter of convenience, really. Though the vast majority of the people in the cosmere will never meet a dragon—let

alone see one in their natural form—dragons do like to interact with mortals. Like a grandmother tucking away that bit of string that wrapped her package, the dragons want to know they have a certain number of easily influenced cultures around, for the proverbial rainy day.

All of this is to explain that when Tress and Crow saw the shadow moving down the large hall to the right, they *kind of* knew what to expect. Indeed, it had a sinuous neck, a reptilian body, and two vast wings, formed as if to block out the sky.

Other details were unexpected. For instance, the mane of silvery hair that adorned the dragon's head, continuing down under the neck and chin as a beard. Or the metallic silver ridges that split the dragon's otherwise onyx hide, outlining his features. This silver ran down the sides of all six limbs, up the sides of the neck, and formed two burnished horns, accompanied by a line of spikes down the back—more subdued, the subjects to the regal majesty of those horns.

There were other mortals in the dragon's house, though they were not allowed in the entry hall when supplicants arrived. Xisis did not want his servants to be tainted by things like reminders of the world outside. They had important work to do, after all: serving him and his research into the complex ecosystem at the bottom of the spore seas.

It is commonly presumed that dragons collect hoards of wealth, and I've often wondered if that tale began because of the otherworldly metal left behind on their corpses. I've never known a dragon to be fond of riches. Ideas though…those they *do* hoard, and in this area they are misers fit for legend.

The dragon did not make the ground shake, despite his enormous size. (He was easily as tall as four humans standing on one another's shoulders.) Indeed, he seemed to glide as he approached, flowing around columns, entering the shadows at the center of the room. Firelight reflected off his dragonsteel, making it seem like liquid metal as he loomed over the two women. Tress gasped; even Crow cringed back.

When Xisis didn't speak, Crow found her courage—it had only gotten a step or two away—and spoke. "Dragon Xisis, I have come to initiate your ancient pact of promise." She gestured to Tress. "To this end, I have brought you this slave to work in your domain."

The dragon leaned down, his breath like burned hickory wood,

and eyed Tress. She looked into those eyes, which were a shimmering mother-of-pearl, and thought she saw into infinity. Then, reflected, she saw herself. And Crow.

You have everything you need…

Tress's courage had never gotten away, though it had been pounded flat by all the other emotions. As it began to shine through, a certain whimsy struck Tress. Crow had nothing to lose… but Tress had *everything* to lose. And in that moment, she bet it all on a desperate ploy.

"Dragon Xisis," Tress said, her voice ragged, "I have come to initiate your ancient pact of promise. To this end, I have brought you this slave to work in your domain." Then Tress gestured to Crow.

THE SACRIFICE

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"...What?" the dragon said.

"…*What!*" Crow said.

"She will make a good slave," Tress explained. "She's very strong—I can show you the bruise on my stomach as proof. And she's not in the least afraid of spores. She used midnight aether earlier tonight."

Crow grabbed Tress, reaching as if to forcibly shut her up. The dragon interrupted this by very deliberately moving his forearm forward, letting five silver claws—each as long as Crow's leg—click against the crimson ground.

"I will not have you harming one another in my house," he said in a deep voice. "One of you shall be my servant, and I do not like damaged property."

Crow looked at her reflection in the dragonsteel claws, then let go of Tress.

"Great dragon," Crow said, "this girl is the servant brought to be your payment. I am the captain of the ship!"

"So you're saying you're the more valuable prize," Tress said, rubbing at her throat where Crow's nails had scored her.

"I do prefer my servants to be of a certain quality," Xisis said. His voice was deep not in a musical sense, more in the way that the ground might vibrate with a profound resonance during a quake.

"But you would also prefer a young servant, wouldn't you?" Crow

said, realizing that she would have to argue her case. “I am old and calcified, stubborn. She is young, easy to mold. Why, she hasn’t even been off her home island for a month yet!”

The dragon settled down, folding his arms. To the horror of both women, he looked *amused*.

“Go on,” he said to Tress. “You have a response to that?”

“Um,” Tress said, “you seem like someone who enjoys a challenge. Which would be more interesting to train? A girl who knows nothing, or a vibrant sea captain, full of skills you could unlock?”

“I prefer not to make too much effort in training my servants, girl,” the dragon said. “You argue against your interests.”

“Yes,” Crow said, “and besides, she is more expert in spores. She has been building devices of ingenious make. She designed a kind of verdant bomb that raised our ship up high above the sea, so rains didn’t destroy us! And she made a gun that fires spores. This girl is some kind of spore prodigy. She will serve you well.”

“Is it true?” the dragon asked Tress. “Did you make those things?”

“I did,” Tress admitted. “I’m not very smart though. I merely took some designs I found and tweaked them.”

“Humble too,” Crow noted. “Who wants an arrogant servant?”

“Crow has experience leading people, sir,” Tress said. “She would make an excellent overseer for your servants.”

“Ha!” Crow said. “Tell him honestly what my crew thinks of me! They *hate* me, don’t they, Tress? Admit it.”

The dragon rested his head on his forearms, looking almost like a dog with its head on its paws, and grinned at the exchange.

“Powerful Xisis,” Crow said, “this girl is *beloved* of the people of my ship. She’s earned their hearts after only a short time sailing with us. She is an excellent cook, and is nauseatingly selfless. When she heard her friends were going to mutiny to prevent me from trading her, she offered to go willingly, to save them from danger.”

“Is this so?” the dragon asked Tress.

“I…” Tress said. “Great dragon, Crow needs you to take her as a servant. She’s dying of the spores in her blood. Only by living with you could she be healed. It would be magnanimous and wise of you to take her.”

“Ha!” Crow said, pointing at Tress. “He knows I’ll ask for healing in trade for you! I will live just fine after this.”

"True," the dragon said. "Child, you are losing ground quickly." He gestured to Crow. "I cannot see a reason why I'd want this piece of filth in my domain when I could have someone even-tempered, well-liked, and skilled."

"You should have tried to be more awful, girl," Crow said. "I warned you that this life was not for you."

"I…" Tress took a deep breath, looking up at the dragon. "I think I'd make a bad servant, great dragon. Because I really, *really* don't want to be one."

"And I do?" Crow said. "I—"

The dragon hushed her with a click of his claw. He narrowed iridescent eyes at Tress. "Tell me, why is it you do not wish to serve me? Contrary to what you might have been told, my servants are treated well. You shall know no disease while you are here. You shall have engaging work, regular meals, and books in your off hours to read at your leisure."

"But dragon, sir," Tress said, "there is someone I must rescue. The man I love is held captive. I need to free him."

"I don't care for the hearts of mortals," the dragon said. "Except for how they taste. Do you have any other argument for why I shouldn't take you right now and put you to work in the kitchens?"

"Because…because…" The Tress she had been might have accepted her fate. The Tress she had been would have wanted to please him. That Tress was dead.

She was now the Tress she had become.

"Because I won't stay," Tress said. "No matter what you do. I will not give up what I want for you, dragon."

"No one has ever escaped my domain."

"Then I will be the first," Tress said, growing louder as she continued. "Because I can promise you this, great dragon. You will *never* be able to trust me alone. I will dedicate everything I have—every thought, every moment, every *waking breath*—to escaping you! I will not calm down. I will not grow complacent! I will not lose my resolve!

"I *will* find a way out. Even if I have to collapse your entire cave! Even if I have to walk through the spores! Even if it takes fifty years, I will never relent. And you, dragon, will eventually have to *kill* me to stop me. Because I *will* get to the Midnight Sea, and I *will* find the Sorceress, and I *will save the man I love*!"

Her voice echoed in the cavernous room. The dragon let it fade,

watching her with ancient eyes.

"The Sorceress?" Xisis said. "You are going to try to confront the *Sorceress*?"

Tress nodded.

"Then perhaps taking you captive now would be a mercy."

"Exactly!" Crow said. "Just as I've been—"

"Oh, hush." The dragon waved a clawed hand in her direction. The cloth enveloping the nearest pillar suddenly wiggled as if alive. It whipped forward, wrapping around Crow's face and gagging her.

Xisis studied Tress, watching her with those incomprehensible swirling eyes. "I believe you," he finally said. "You are too driven to make a useful servant."

"Thank you," Tress said.

Crow, in turn, began to claw at the gag, her eyes wide. The strange black cloth wrapped her further, then pulled her back tight against the pillar.

"She really is awful, isn't she?" the dragon said.

"I'm afraid so, sir," Tress said.

"Well, I suppose I do need someone to scrub floors, now that I've promoted Lili." The dragon stretched, rising up and arching his back like a cat—one that was over twenty feet tall and covered in scales. "I make it a point not to interfere too much in the workings of the society above. If you really have made the discoveries she mentioned, then by taking you, I'd be interrupting the planet's technological progress. I'll pick that as my excuse for letting you go."

"Excuse, sir?" Tress asked.

"Yes, excuse," he said, making it clear he would explain no further. "What is the payment you request?"

"…Payment?" Tress looked at Crow. "Oh! I hadn't gotten that far, sir. And…I don't know that I can take payment for selling a person…"

"If she really is a spore eater," Xisis said, "then you've saved her life. I can heal the disease, yes, but I wouldn't have mentioned to her that the healing only lasts a year or two at most. The infestation will return, so long as she is away from me. Her only path toward long-term survival is to remain here."

Tress considered that, and thought that if he was lying—and the cure *was* permanent—this would be an excellent way to make certain Crow remained with him willingly. And so, Tress wisely

remained silent on the matter.

"Regardless," the dragon said, "the deal has been struck. I must pay you, however little I think the trade was worth. So ask your boon. Be quick with it."

"Can you remove a curse that the Sorceress bestowed?"

"No," he said. "Nor will I do anything to help your quest. There is precisely one being I fear on this planet—and no, your friend Cephandrius doesn't count."

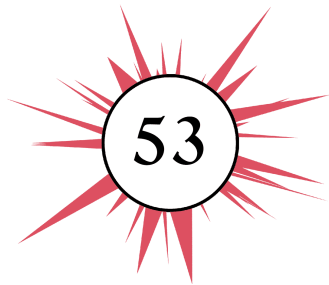
Rude.

"I don't know if there's anything I want…" Tress said, feeling exhausted. "My life is enough." She hesitated. "Unless…"

"Yes?"

"Would you consider three small boons instead of one large one?"

THE SURVIVOR



A short time later, a very tired Tress hiked the last few feet up out of the tunnel, holding three cloth-wrapped packages—one larger, two smaller.

She was greeted by the sight of Laggart, standing watch at the ship's rail. The two stood, facing one another while his brain caught up to his eyes, then his common sense came huffing up behind with an ache in its side. He lowered his gun and backed away.

This allowed a crowd of more friendly faces to appear. They cheered as Tress sluggishly settled into the ship's launch. The tunnel collapsed in on itself as soon as the Dougs began hoisting her up to the deck. At the top, she was greeted by an ecstatic Ann.

"How?" she demanded. "How?"

"The captain probably should have gagged me," Tress said. "Take note, Ann. If you ever go to make an important deal, make certain your payment can't speak for itself."

You'd be surprised how often that advice has been relevant during my travels.

"Here," Tress said, handing one of the small packages to Ann. "The dragon couldn't help me with my problem, so I got this for you."

The woman took it, frowning. But Tress was too tired to explain at the moment. The crew, realizing this, gave her a little space as

she picked her way over to where Dr. Ulaam was tending Fort and Salay. Their wounds were already being treated by one of his fantastic salves—they didn't heal a person immediately, but they did speed it up and left one feeling in much better shape.

Ulaam was explaining the benefits of the various noses he could provide (I've always wanted to try the one that can't smell cheeses), but Fort just slumped against the rail, staring ahead as if dazed.

Tress knelt, then delicately unwrapped the larger of the two remaining packages. Inside was another board like the one Crow had destroyed. Fort sat up immediately. He looked from her to the board, then back at her.

Then he hugged her. No words needed to be said. Ann walked up holding the pair of spectacles she'd unwrapped, one end dangling from her fingers as if she were holding a dead mouse by the tail.

"The dragon," Tress explained, "says you have something called micropsia. He gave a technical explanation, but I didn't understand it. I don't know if that disease could have caused you to somehow hit someone standing *behind* you, but…well, those spectacles should help."

Tress handed the final package—more an envelope—to Salay, then stood and walked to the steps up to the quarterdeck. She settled on the steps and tried to process everything.

The others left her alone for the time being, so Tress wasn't interrupted until Salay came limping over, using a crutch.

"You should probably stay off that leg," Tress noted.

Salay shrugged, settling down with some effort next to Tress. She carried a folded piece of paper.

"Filistrate City," Salay said. "I *searched* Filistrate City."

"The dragon says your father arrived there six months ago."

"Damn," Salay said. "Right after I left. I'd have kept hunting, never knowing he was behind me…" Then she reached over and gave Tress a hug.

It was exactly what Tress needed right then. When emotions start leaking, it's best to give the body a good squeeze and force them right on out. Like lancing a boil.

When their emotions were thoroughly lanced for the moment, Salay forced herself to stand up. Crutch under her arm, she saluted. "It will take us about a week to reach the Midnight Sea, Captain. But supplies should hold out just fine. We bought plenty at that last port."

“Salay…” Tress said, “you should be captain.”

“Can’t be captain,” Salay said. “It’s my job to make certain the captain is making good decisions. That’s what a first mate is for.”

“But—”

“You’re trying to make a bad decision, *Captain*,” Salay said. “See? I’m good at the job.”

“The Midnight is dangerous,” Tress said. “The dragon wasn’t willing to give me any help. Even *he* fears the Sorceress.”

“Well,” Salay said, “we’ll just have to figure out how to cross the Midnight like we did the Crimson, Captain. Do we set sail now, or wait for the morning?”

Other objections died before Tress could get them out.

This was what *she* wanted.

“We sail tonight, Helmswoman,” Tress said. “And if I’m the captain, then I’m going to go claim Crow’s bed. Don’t wake me up unless Death himself has shown up, nails in his eyes. Even then, see if you can stall.”

PART
6

THE VALET

People want to imagine that time is consistent, steady, stable. They define the day, create tools to measure it, chop it up into hours, minutes, seconds. They pretend each one is equal to the others—when in fact some are clearly prime cuts, and others are full of gristle.

Tress understood this now, as she'd known a hearty day thick with meat and fat. But the next few were lean and limber, passing quickly. While not the diaphane days of a vacation, they were ephemeral nonetheless—for all their increasing tension. The ship drew steadily closer to the Midnight Sea, interrupted only once when Tress had to lift them during a stilling.

The rain missed them on that occasion, but none of the crew had complained about the hassle of chopping vines off the ship. If anything, this near miss was a reminder that they—by all reasonable accounts—should not be alive.

Tress felt a momentum to her travel, a phantom tailwind. Encouraging, but also relentless. After so much wandering, so many detours, it was happening. She was sailing to confront the Sorceress. This was perhaps what made the days pass with such elasticity—if the first part of her voyage had been the bow being drawn, now the arrow had been released.

She also decided to cast off a little emotional ballast. She was

tired of lies and deception. With a frankness that was honestly somewhat inconvenient when trying to create a story, she gathered Salay, Ann, and Fort—then introduced them to Huck.

He'd agreed to it reluctantly, and perhaps only because he'd been so elated when Tress had stumbled into the captain's cabin that first night after confronting the dragon—and discovered him in a little cage, the cat pawing at the bars. Despite everything, Tress found room within her to feel guilty for not thinking of him. In her defense, she'd assumed him safe in her cabin—though the knowledge that Crow had ransacked the place should have raised if not a red flag, at least a fuchsia streamer.

Still, his excitement to hear of her exploits had washed that guilt away like grime off a window. And now he sat on her palm, introducing himself to the ship's officers, explaining how he and Tress had met. That done, he and Tress both waited for their reactions.

You did so much to help, Huck! Fort wrote. M**oons! We need to tell the Dougs. We can't have anyone stepping on you! You're a hero!**

The rat perked up.

"Yeah," Ann said. "And we've got to do something about that cat—can't let it roam free! I'll build a cage or something for it, keep it in my room until the next port."

All turned to Salay, who did her best to look calm and commanding despite her crutch. She rubbed her chin. "A rat on the crew," she said. "Tell me…what is your opinion on tiny pirate hats?"

Spoiler: he turned out to be quite fond of them. It was honestly a little distracting.

The second thing Tress did in the name of abject honesty was explain the challenges that would face them in the Midnight Sea. This, in turn, led her to explain who she was, why she'd left her home, and what she was trying to do.

Afterward, Ann did ask what was so great about this guy she loved. Tress did her best to explain, though she was certain world-traveled people like them would find her love plain and unremarkable.

She underestimated the power of simple words spoken with passion. No one questioned her after that.

So, the days faded behind her like the setting Crimson Moon. And

ahead, a jet-black moon broke the horizon. It reflected no light, and seemed more a void than an object. A tunnel to nothing. As it emerged from the horizon Tress feared, irrationally, that it would keep growing—that the Midnight Moon wouldn't be the size of the others, but would turn out to be a vast darkness that consumed the entirety of the sky.

To escape it, she spent time in her new quarters. The captain had far more space than Tress had been assigned, though she still used her old room for spore experiments. She filled page after page of the captain's notebook with discarded ideas for how to protect the ship as it crossed the Midnight Sea.

Trouble was, her mind didn't seem to work right anymore. Where it had once seized upon ideas with a predatory vigor, now it seemed trapped in a room, scratching uselessly at the walls with nothing to show for the effort.

What had happened to her ingenuity? Her self-defining thoughtfulness? She grew more and more frustrated as each day slipped away from her, leaving no further progress than frazzled hair and another scribbled-out page in the notebook. What was wrong with her?

Nothing.

Nothing was wrong with Tress. Her mind was functioning properly. She hadn't lost her creativity. She hadn't run out of ideas. She was simply tired.

We want to imagine that people are consistent, steady, stable. We define who they are, create descriptions to lock them on a page, divide them up by their likes, talents, beliefs. Then we pretend some—perhaps most—are better than we are, because they stick to their definitions, while we never quite fit ours.

Truth is, people are as fluid as time is. We adapt to our situation like water in a strangely shaped jug, though it might take us a little while to ooze into all the little nooks. Because we adapt, we sometimes don't recognize how twisted, uncomfortable, or downright wrong the container is that we've been told to inhabit.

We can keep going that way for a while. We *can* pretend we fit that jug, awkward nooks and all. But the longer we do, the worse it gets. The more it wears on us. The more exhausted we become. Even if we're doing nothing at all, because simply holding the shape can take all the effort in the world. More, if we want to make it look natural.

There was a lot about being a pirate that *did* suit Tress. She'd learned and grown a great deal—but it had still been a relatively short time since she'd left the Rock. She was tired in a way that a good night's sleep—or ten of them—couldn't cure. Her mind didn't have any more to give. She needed to allow herself a chance to catch up to the person she'd become.

She was now only three days away from the Midnight Sea, and she was no closer to thinking of a way through it. And pounding her head against the page wasn't accomplishing anything more than getting ink on her forehead.

Tress was dreading what would happen next. And indeed, it arrived with a polite knock on her door. She nodded to Huck, who had—for some strange reason—decided she needed a valet. Did captains have valets? She thought those were for gentlemen with so many pairs of shoes they needed someone to organize them all.

Huck scampered over to the table beside the entry and called, "The captain bids you come in!"

Tress figured she could have done that herself. She was not yet accustomed to the finer points of being in charge, which often involve being too important to do things the sensible way.

Salay, Ann, and Fort entered. Tress steeled herself for their recrimination. Here, today, they would see the truth. That she had no plan. That she was an unfit captain.

In actuality, all they saw was that she had very nice penmanship. Even written backward on her forehead.

"All right, Captain," Salay said. "We've been giving this voyage some thought. And the protections around the Sorceress seem almost impossible to overcome."

"I know," Tress said, bracing herself. "Salay, I…I don't…"

"Therefore," Salay continued, getting out some papers, "we've been working hard on ways to overcome them. We've got some pretty good suggestions here, if you want to see them."

Tress blinked.

Well, she often blinked, as people do. In this case, it was a meaningful blink. It was the kind that said, *Wait. What did I just hear?*

"You have…suggestions?" Tress asked.

"Here, let's get to it," Salay said, each of them grabbing a chair and settling down next to Tress's meeting table.

Tress drifted over, then looked with amazement as Salay laid out

the first set of plans. “This was Fort’s idea,” she said. “He should explain.”

Huck says, he wrote on his board, **that the island is protected by machine men, an entire legion of them, who can’t be harmed in any way. I started working on a way to distract them, until I realized you already solved this problem, Tress.**

The new sign was an improvement over the other. Lines of text disappeared at the top, replaced with new ones at the bottom, so he didn’t have to stop—he could keep tapping words on the back for them, speaking more in real time.

Also, it could do different fonts.

“I…solved the problem?” Tress asked, taking the chair that Huck was trying to push over for her. Once she sat, he dusted his paws off as if he’d done an excellent job, then went to count her pairs of shoes.

You did, Fort said. **With your flare gun modifications! You were already prepared to face someone we can’t kill. We just need to eXpand what you came up with! I figure, a legion of mechanical men can’t hurt us if they’re wrapped in vines.**

See, here’s a schematic for a cannonball using the ideas you came up with. We could lure out the metal men, bombard the beach with verdant, and tie them all up. Then you slip right past!

She took the diagram. It had several parts that said “sprouter mumbo-jumbo” on it, so he obviously didn’t grasp the finer details of what she’d done. Yet, the idea was sound. Excellent, even. They already had cannonballs made to explode on a timer—she could build ones that burst with vines instead of spraying water.

“This is brilliant, Fort!” she said.

Fair trade! he said, tapping the board. **Once you have your friend back, then we’ll be even. Not before.**

She didn’t point out that he’d only lost his original board because of her—and so giving one back to him was already a fair trade. She was too amazed.

They’d solved her problem. Instead of being angry at her for not having the solution, they had worked out one themselves. She… didn’t need to do this all on her own. That shouldn’t have been such a revelation for her. But after spending ages walking around with everyone piling bricks in your arms, it can throw you off balance when someone removes a brick to carry for you.

“Thank you,” Tress whispered, trying to maintain her composure. She wasn’t certain if captains should cry in front of their crew. Seemed like there’d be a maritime law against it. “Thank you so much! I’ve been trying and *trying* to think of a way through this.”

We’re here for you, Fort said. **We’re your crew, Tress. Your friends. Let us help.**

“Yes, of course,” Tress said. “But…thank you.”

She looked at them each in turn, beaming.

“I’m trying to figure out why it says ‘Ask nicely’ on your forehead, Tress,” Ann said.

Technically, Fort added, **it says “ʏʃəɔıu ʞsA.”**

“Actually it says neither,” Salay said. “Because it’s crossed out. See?”

“Oh yeah,” Ann said. “Anyway, we might have a solution to the other problem on the island: getting into the tower. You gave us the clue to this one too.”

“Growing a tree of verdant vines?” Tress said. “To reach the top, and get in that way? I thought of that, Ann, but *surely* the Sorceress keeps the door locked.”

But not the window, Fort said. **Where she lets out her ravens.**

“Far too small.”

For a human, he wrote.

Their eyes turned toward Huck, who stood before the room’s wardrobe. He’d finished counting the shoes Tress owned. That hadn’t been difficult, as she was wearing both of them presently. So he’d moved on to making a mental list of the different types she’d need to buy.

He felt the stares. It’s a thing rats learn. So he turned, feeling like the only piece of cheese left in the larder. “What?” he said.

“We need someone small,” Salay said, “to sneak into the Sorceress’s tower through her raven window.”

“Tricky,” Huck said, “since I don’t think any human could fit through… Oh. Rat. Right.” He wrung his paws together.

We need to do this for the captain, Fort said. **And the debt we owe her.**

“Huck owes me no debt,” Tress said. “He wouldn’t be on this ship except for me.”

Which means he’d be on the bottom of the Verdant Sea.

I doubt he’d have made it to the bottom. Rats are rather low in body mass. He’d almost certainly have ended up wrapped in a vine

ball, drifting through the middle depths of the ocean until he decomposed. But as no one in the room was versed in spore depth density and relative fluidized viscosity, they took Fort's words as fact.

"It's all right," Tress said to Huck. "You don't need to do it if you don't want to. I'd hate to force you into anything. But…it *is* a good solution. You're good at sneaking, Huck."

"But how will I reach the window?"

"On verdant vines, which I'll grow upward for you."

"No good," he said. "The tower is coated in silver. Didn't I tell you that?"

He hadn't. And that *would* cause a problem. Tress sat back, her face falling. Something in that expression pained Huck. He couldn't stand how gloomy she'd been feeling lately. Like smog over an island, he thought. So something slipped out.

"I can get you through the door," Huck said. "I…have a way we rats know about. If you somehow got me to the tower, I could open it. But Tress, isn't all of this irrelevant? We would have to cross the Midnight Sea first. And we shouldn't do that. We've barely survived the Crimson!"

He was, unfortunately, correct. Tress looked to her friends, hoping they knew a quick solution to this problem as they had the first two. No one spoke up. The other three might not have been marked, both literally and literately, by the fruits of their frustration on this point, but they were equally stymied.

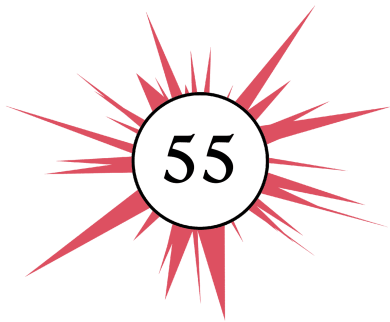
Curiously though, there is a feature of collaboration that is often misunderstood. Two heads are not necessarily better than one (no matter what Dr. Ulaam might say). That rather depends on the heads in question.

However, when someone tries, it makes *others* more willing to try. And when you taste a little success—even vicariously—it can act as a mental laxative.

Or if you prefer, a little success is the metaphoric bang on the front of the mental vending machine that jostles loose the stuck ideas.

Tress's eyes went wide.

THE HYPOCRITE



Tress placed exactly two midnight spores on the table. The other officers shied back noticeably, though there wasn't a lot of room in the captain's cabin for shying. She'd spent a little while preparing this experiment, which had given Huck time to scamper off, not wanting to be in the room with more active midnight spores.

Tress put her silver knife on the table, then got out an eyedropper full of water. "Midnight spores behave differently than the others. The others all have an immediate, almost *chemical* reaction to water. But these spores, they seem almost alive. Like they want something."

"What…what do they want, Cap'n?" Ann asked.

"Water," Tress said, leaning down to eye level at the table, holding her eye dropper. "It's like…a trade. I give them water, and they obey me for a time." She raised the eyedropper, causing Salay to gasp despite herself. "This should be safe. But in case it's not, be ready to sever my bond to the spores with that knife."

Sever it how? Fort asked, leaning forward. He was the only one in the room who didn't seem positively terrified. Something about this entire conversation (and if you've been paying attention, you'll know what) intrigued him—overcoming his natural fear.

"Black lines," Tress said, glancing at his board. "Cut them with the knife. But I'm hoping that won't be necessary this time."

She released a single drop of water. Like before, the midnight spores bubbled and merged, becoming something not unlike an undulating pustule. Or (and please forgive me) a boiling boil.

As before, Tress felt a connection to it immediately. A tugging at her mind. She could initiate the link, could offer the water and make the bond. But for now she resisted.

"I feel something," Ann said. "Like it's yanking on my brain!"

"It's looking for a host," Tress said. "Or…a buyer. The monsters that roam the Midnight Sea? This is what they are. Creations of the Sorceress, bound to her. I wonder how she feeds so many…"

The globule lurched toward Fort, then took on the shape of a cup —specifically, the large metal tankard that was the heaviest and largest of Tress's collection. The midnight cup then grew legs and moved toward Fort. He'd bonded it inadvertently, as evidenced by him suddenly putting his hand to his mouth—which would inevitably have begun to feel dry. A small black line began to move between him and it.

Tress seized control.

When Captain Crow had used the midnight spores, Tress had been able to take control of the thing, destroying it in the process. This time it was far easier. She pushed her mind against the spores and offered water. More water. A bribe.

The thing immediately moved to her instead, and let her take over. She was closer to it, which Tress thought was key. She took complete control, then severed the bond before she could be drawn into the thing's eyes and experience life as if she were a midnight cup.

It popped and evaporated, leaving smoke, then nothing.

Fort gasped, then took a long drink from a red ceramic mug of water Tress offered him.

"What happened?" Salay asked, stepping forward.

"I took control of the thing," Tress said. "I bribed it with my water instead—offering that in trade, giving it more freely than it could take from an unwilling subject. Once it accepted, I took control, then dismissed it."

"And…you think you can do this with the ones guarding the Midnight Sea?" Ann asked.

"We are going to find out," Tress said, standing up. "How long until—"

A pounding came at the door. Tress hesitated, then nodded. Ann

moved to open it, and they were confronted by Laggart.

Hell. I forgot to tell you about Laggart. Tress let Laggart stay on the *Crow's Song*. She rightly figured that without Crow around to impress, he wouldn't try anything funny.

(Not that he could, mind you. Laggart was to funny what liquid nitrogen is to a healthy set of lungs.)

He'd spent the last few days strutting back and forth up and down the deck. Ornery. Confused. Uncertain. "I need to speak to you in private, Captain," he said.

Tress was unsure about this, so she rested her hand on her flare gun. But she nodded to the others, indicating they should leave. They did so, closing the door behind them as Laggart stepped inside.

They regarded one another for a short time. Then Laggart drew himself up—looking like a buzzard that forgot to put on its feathers after its morning shave—and met Tress's gaze. "I demand," he said, "that you shoot me."

"Shoot you?" she said.

"For what I've done to you!"

"I told you that you were forgiven for that."

"I know!" he said and began to pace. "Captain, I can't take the lies. I *know* what you're really doing. I *know* you're waiting until I'm calm and comfortable, so you can toss me over *then*. It's cruel, waiting to kill a man until he's sure you won't. I figured you for someone better than that."

He spun on her. "I demand to be shot. Get it over with. Be forthright. Shoot me."

Tress sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Laggart, I'm not going to shoot you."

"But—"

"Look, I'm far too tired to pretend to understand what your mind is doing to you right now. I'm not going to shoot you, but if you insist, I can throw you in the brig or something."

He perked up, then craned his neck. "Really?"

"Really."

"You'd do that for me? Imprison me instead of kill me?"

"Laggart," she said. "I'm not going to kill you. I was *never* going to kill you. I didn't even kill Crow."

He chewed on that. Then chewed on it some more. Then a little more. Those were words with gristle.

Laggart was not a smart man. True, the things he lectured people on could fill a dictionary—but what he *actually* knew would barely fill a postcard. That said, he wasn't an idiot either. He settled somewhere between smart and stupid, perched on the very peak of the bell curve and assuming that it was the right place to be, as highest has to be best.

In that moment though, he understood.

Tress was willing to throw him in the brig. But…she wasn't going to shoot him.

She wasn't going to toss him overboard. She *hadn't* been playing tricks on him. She had been *honest*.

She'd been *kind* to him.

This was the most difficult idea he'd ever been forced to swallow. You see, Laggart hadn't known much kindness during his existence, and it's a sorry truth that people often live what they know. He didn't view himself as mean or callous. He thought the way he acted was normal, because that was how he'd always been treated. In the land where everyone screams, everyone is also slightly deaf.

Now, it should be said that there *are* people who escape such a cycle of cruelty. When you find them, cherish them. Because unfortunately, many continue like Laggart, never realizing the way they are. Until perhaps they experience a moment like the one that happened on that ship. Where Tress showed him pure kindness, forgiving his actions.

Yes, he was no longer confused. Instead he was horrified. Because he'd realized at long last that there were people who *felt* the things they said.

There were genuine people in the world. To a determined hypocrite like him, that changed everything. He stumbled to the door, shoved it open, and fled.

Tress, in turn, watched him with her head cocked. Blissfully unaware of the war happening inside the man's heart. She didn't demand he be thrown in the brig. If he wasn't going to press the issue, she wouldn't either. Instead she carefully tucked away her box of midnight spores.

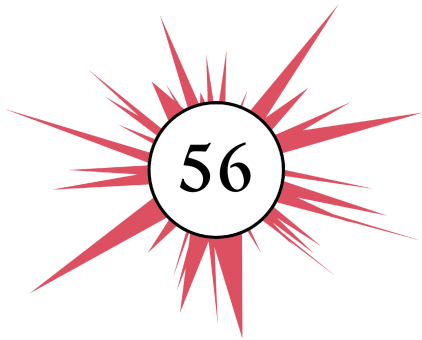
And honestly, she felt a growing elation. She had a plan for dealing with the monsters. If she could defeat them, she would have overcome the final obstacle between her and the Sorceress.

She was close. Truly *close*. She felt like celebrating.

That lasted about as long as it took her to find out what I'd been

up to the past few days.

THE TRAITOR



Tress expected a certain sense of reverberation from the officers as she left her cabin. She felt enthusiasm, relief, excitement. They had an answer to each of the problems they needed to face in order to reach the Sorceress. The other officers, naturally, should have returned similar emotions to harmonize with her own, making the music of shared success.

So she was confused as she saw Salay running up to her with a concerned expression. Apparently Dr. Ulaam's treatment had run its course, but Tress hoped Salay had not grown any extra toes.

"What?" Tress asked, her sense of dread returning. "What's wrong?"

Salay led her to the hold of the ship, where I sat in chains, happily thinking of great conversation starters like politics, religion, and your uncle's overtly racist views. I experienced my tawdry ruminations among the remnants of the ship's food stores. An alarmingly small collection now, as I'd happily dumped the rest of the stores overboard.

"We caught him with three jugs of water," Salay said. "He was preparing to toss them out the rear porthole of the middle deck—where it appears he's been throwing out our food stores for days now."

Tress let out a groan. "How much do we have left?"

“Plenty of water,” Salay said. “But less than half of our food. Roughly enough to reach the Verdant Sea, should we leave now. And Captain…we saw birds on the Crimson only twice, and they don’t live in the Midnight at all. We can’t forage out here.”

They looked at me.

“I had to throw the jugs out,” I explained, “as the food is lonely on the bottom of the sea. Also, Tress, how does your uncle feel about seagulls taking his jobs and/or sandwiches?”

Tress looked at the gathered officers, then all of them turned to Ulaam, expecting him to have an answer. They foolishly assumed he could grasp the complex network of motivations, loyalties, and historical failures that made up the ever-changing web of my psyche.

“He is currently way too stupid to have done this on his own,” Ulaam said. “See how the ones he was going to toss out are marked with chalk?”

Well, all right then. Points to Ulaam, I suppose.

“The rat said my mission was absolutely *vital*,” I told them. “It’s also secret. So please don’t tell Tress.”

A short time later, Tress approached Huck in his quarters—her former ones, which she’d assigned to him. His very own room. Yes, it didn’t have silver, but it was more than most rats ever got. He’d been sitting there making a list of all the hats she owned. It only had one item so far, but he was an optimistic type of rat valet. What’s more, he’d been so nervous that he’d needed something to pass the time.

He looked at her. “Did the test with the midnight spores work?” he said, dropping the pencil and scurrying over. “I would have come back to watch. Should have. But…that’s not something a valet has to do, right? Be around midnight spores? They give me chills, Tress.”

“I…” She didn’t know what to say. It is an affliction that I’ve never known, but I hear it can be quite debilitating.

“Tress?” Huck asked. “I feel like you should be excited. Maybe enthusiastic. Certainly relieved. Yet…”

“I’ve discovered,” she said, “that our food stores are frighteningly low. Somehow, we lost count of how much we had. It seems…we have barely enough to make it to the Verdant Sea, should we turn back now.”

“Oh!” Huck said. “Well, that’s dreadful news, but I suppose with

everything that has been happening, it's not too surprising that something slipped through the cracks! We must make sail for the Verdant Sea, restock, then…" He trailed off, meeting her eyes. He wilted. "Hoid talked, didn't he?"

"You're remarkably good at reading human emotions," she said. "For a rat."

"Well, emotions are emotions," he said. "Doesn't matter the species. Fear, concern, anxiousness."

"Betrayal?" she asked. "Is that emotion the same for both human and rat?"

"So far as I can tell," he said, his voice growing very soft. "I'm sorry, Tress. I can't let you face the Sorceress. I *can't*. For your own good, you see."

Ah, those words.

I've heard those words. I've said those words. The words that proclaim, in bald-faced arrogance, "I don't trust you to make your own decisions." The words we pretend will soften the blow, yet instead layer condescension on top of already existent pain. Like dirt on a corpse.

Oh yes. I've said those words. I said them with sixteen other people, in fact.

"It hurts that you don't trust me, Huck," she said. "But you know, it hurts more that I can't trust *you* now."

"I get that," he said. "You deserve better."

She found a cage for him. It felt appropriate that she should put him back in one, and Crow had a couple of the appropriate size for keeping messenger birds.

It broke Tress's heart to leave Huck inside, huddled against the bars, refusing to face her. But she had a crew to protect, and she couldn't risk Huck doing something even more drastic to stop them. As it was, she barely contained her frustration. They were so close. Now they'd have to sail across the entire Crimson and restock.

Moons…could they afford to restock? How was she going to pay the crew? Would they continue as pirates? And if she did find Charlie, what then? Disband the crew? Give the ship to Salay and go home? Her focus on reaching the Sorceress had let her, so far, procrastinate addressing these questions. Payroll didn't seem so pressing when you expected to get captured and turned into a marmoset the next week.

These thoughts weighed on her as she opened the door and found

a collection of Dougs waiting outside.

By now, Tress knew them all personally. The one at the front, holding her cap, was a good-natured woman who had once explained that she thought birds were the souls of the dead, watching over sailors as they traveled. It had been awkward, considering Tress had been serving pigeon pie that night; the Doug had just laughed and said that *was* a way of helping.

They all had quirks like that. Personalities, dreams, lives. Human beings are like the shorelines of continents. The closer you look, the more detail you see, basically into infinity. If I didn't practice narrative triage, you'd be here all week listening to how a Doug once got so drunk, she ended up as queen.

Today, fortunately for us, they acted in concert—and in service of the story. Because they had something to tell Tress.

"Let's keep going, Captain," the lead Doug said. "If you don't mind. Let's keep sailing, and go save that man of yours."

"But, the food…" Tress said.

"Pardon, Captain," another Doug said, "but we can eat verdant for a little while."

"Agreed," said another. "If it helps you, we can eat weeds for a few weeks."

"Wait. You can *eat* verdant vines?" Tress asked.

The Dougs were shocked to hear she didn't know this. You might be too, as it was mentioned earlier in the story as clever foreshadowing. But Tress had been distracted during that conversation, and had missed the point. Besides, few people who had grown up on islands had to know that the vines were technically edible. Because on islands, there was so much better food you could grow with far less danger, assuming you had access to soil or compost vats.

Even her family, poor though it had been, had always had normal food to eat. Regardless, people *could* survive on verdant vines, provided they were fully grown, a process that involved soaking them for a day. They provided some few calories and nutrients. Do it too long without supplemental protein and you'll have a rough time, but they could manage to get to the Sorceress's island and back on vines, plus what they had remaining.

Behind her, Huck looked at his feet. He was realizing that in the end, his betrayal hadn't even accomplished anything.

"Thank you," Tress said to the Dougs.

“Captain,” the one at the front said, “we spent a *month* eating Fort’s food. Then you started cooking dinners that didn’t taste like they were scraped off the bottom of a shoe and…well, we can survive a little verdant.”

“Besides,” another added, “it’s worth continuing. After this, we’re gonna be the only pirates who ever robbed the *Sorceress herself*!”

THE MALIGNED FASHION EXPERT

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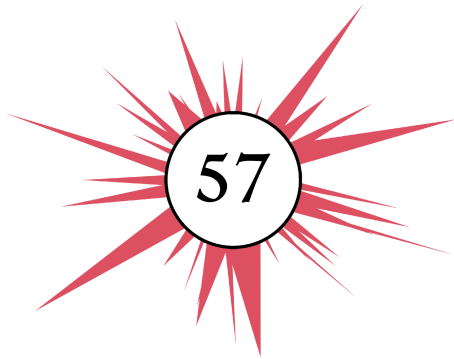


About that.

Tress knew that there was a hole in her plans. In fact, there were exceedingly more holes in her plan than there were wholes. For example, she couldn't be certain she'd correctly guessed the island's location. Even if she had, there was no guarantee their plans would work. She might not be able to get past the Sorceress's defenses.

All of those issues, however, were secondary to the biggest one. Lurking like a shadow beneath the ocean. Her focus so far had revolved around getting *to* the island, then *into* the tower.

But what *then*?

How under the moons was she going to find, then rescue Charlie? How would Tress deal with the Sorceress? Their plan involved firing cannons at the metal servants on the beach. That would make a ruckus and certainly draw attention.

How would Tress, after making so much noise, secretly get to the tower so that…

So that Huck could let them in.

Her confidence wavered. Well, it had been wavering for days—not unexpectedly, considering its flimsy foundation. Now it threatened to topple right over. Their plans had relied on Huck letting them into the tower. Now that obviously wasn't an option.

Tress felt sick about this, but no solutions revealed themselves

over the next few days. The ship sailed inexorably toward the terrible Midnight Moon, until it reached the border. That place where spores mingled, like a scar that was festering and black on one side. A limb that had suffered full necrosis.

Black spores, stretching to infinity. Tress watched from the quarterdeck, feeling an unnatural quiet as the Dougs stilled and even the sails seemed to hold their breaths. It was here, the Midnight Sea.

Salay looked to Tress.

"Drop anchor, Helmswoman," Tress said. "It's nearly night. I shouldn't like to sail that sea in darkness."

"Agreed," Salay said.

"Keep a double watch tonight," Tress suggested. "I don't fancy being taken by surprise—either by rain, or by something else coming up through that darkness."

Salay nodded, visibly uncomfortable.

Tress moved to go down to her cabin, then paused. "Salay. Have you ever heard of anyone sailing it successfully?"

"The Verdant King keeps sending fleets to try to capture the Sorceress," Salay said. "Some ships do survive the Crimson. That's random luck, after all. I've never heard of one coming back from the Midnight though. They sail out into that, and are almost instantly overrun by dark creations of foul spores."

Tress shivered. Did she really think she could do what those capable sailors had failed to do? What was she thinking? Why was she even here? She was a sham of a captain, playing dress-up.

Granted, Tress wasn't giving herself enough credit—please act surprised—as she'd come quite far, all things considered. And it's true that numerous members of the king's court hadn't managed to survive their first encounter upon the Midnight Sea. But then, you've met at least one member of the king's court: he was the handsome fellow in the early part of the story with both the jaw and the intellect of a marble bust. So, you know, maybe they didn't set the highest standard.

Regardless, Tress was suddenly very uncertain of herself. She fled below, to the familiar hallway of the middle deck. She passed her old room, and found herself *nostalgic* for a couple weeks earlier. Days when she'd sat reading about spores while listening to the comforting footsteps above. Those footfalls had sounded so confident. Random, but somehow still rhythmic. Beats indicating a

song the crew all knew and played together.

Now she was in charge. The one everybody was confident in was *her*.

She approached Dr. Ulaam's office and was let in after a quick knock. She found him inspecting his hand, which had grown a sixth finger. Tress sighed in relief. Finally a normal and familiar sight.

"Tress!" he said, trying out a ring on the finger. "I'm pleased by the visit! Have you reconsidered my offer?"

"Thank you, but no," she said. "I'm rather attached to all of my toes."

"Everyone is, dear. That's why the Father invented scalpels. But now, you look distraught. Here, sit. Let me boil some water." She sat down as he used some odd device that worked like a hot plate, but without fire or spores to warm it up. He set a kettle on top, then turned and regarded her, grey-skinned fingers laced in front of him as he leaned against the counter. "Speak, please."

"Ulaam," she said, "I can't defeat the Sorceress."

"No, of course you can't," he said.

"All of the others are expecting me to. And…I'm increasingly terrified I'll let them down."

"Ah, well then," he said, "can I help you with this anxiety, hmmm? I don't even have to give you a sedative. You needn't worry."

"I needn't?" she said. "Really?"

"Yes. You see, no one expects you to defeat the Sorceress. I believe they're all expecting to die. And so, you won't disappoint them, child, when the Sorceress inevitably murders the entire crew!"

She groaned.

"That was a joke," he noted. "I doubt she's capable of killing me—though she thinks she can. Even if she is right, she *certainly* can't kill Hoid, even in his current state. So it will only be most of the crew she murders."

Tress felt dizzy.

Ulaam, it should be noted, is not known for his bedside manner—as I've pointed out, his people lost something when they stopped being forced to imitate actual humans. I can genuinely say that without that burden, they've all become increasingly themselves over the decades.

That said, Ulaam is legitimately the best doctor I've ever met. If

you are easily stressed, but need his help, I suggest you ask him to sew his mouth shut before he visits. He'll probably find the idea novel enough that he'll try it.

That day, however, he realized he'd said too much. Even Ulaam, a creature with the empathic talents of an angry emu, could occasionally realize when someone was in emotional distress.

"Child," he said, "I—"

"How *could* you?" Tress snapped at him. "How can you *sit there* and not care? What is *wrong* with you?"

"Oh!" he said. "Hm. Ha ha. Well, no need to bite my head off. I have several saws for the purpose right over—"

"Jokes don't *help*, Ulaam!" she said, standing up.

It hadn't been a joke, mind you. He actually had three. He let her pace for a little bit, and when the teakettle began to whistle, he didn't move to get it.

As she paced, one point stuck in her brain. He'd mentioned Hoid again. The drooling cabin boy. Ulaam was a creature of strange powers, but he saw *me* as someone even greater.

It wasn't the first time Ulaam had said something like that. But this time it actually struck her.

Finally she took a deep breath. "I shouldn't have snapped at you," she said. "You've been helpful in the past, Ulaam, telling me things you didn't have to. I shouldn't get angry at you for not doing more. I…I don't know what's wrong with me. I never would have acted that way in the past."

"I think," Ulaam said, "that perhaps nothing is wrong. Maybe you *should* snap at me more often. I forget sometimes what I've been told about the stresses mortals live under."

"You're right though," she said, pacing the other direction in the small room. "We *are* going to die. This quest is foolishness! When it was only *me* who was risking my life for Charlie, that was bad enough. I can't force the rest to join me."

"You aren't forcing them, Tress," Ulaam said. He finally rose and began to make the tea. "Have you seen how they walk these days? How they hold their heads? They know they're partially to blame for the people Crow killed.

"You're not bullying them. You're offering them a chance at reclaiming their humanity. They *want* to try to rescue your friend. They *want* to prove to themselves that even though they might not be first-rate men and women of valor, they at least possess a

secondhand variety."

He turned, handing her a cup and gesturing toward the seat. It was a nice cup. Tin, but dinged up with the respectable scars of favorite use, and shined along the handle from the caress of fingers. She sighed, taking the seat and the tea, though she put the latter aside to let it cool.

"Look," she said, "*Huck* was willing to move against me. Perhaps I should see his point. Even if I don't, I can't use him to get into the tower now. So the mission is a bust."

"You still have Midnight Essence," Ulaam said. "Maybe you can make a creature that can sneak in and unlock the door."

"The tower is coated with silver," Tress said. "So I wouldn't be able to touch it as a midnight creature. At least that's what Huck said. I don't know if that's true, or what to trust from him, but either way we have a bigger problem. Ulaam, I can't beat the Sorceress. She's going to know I'm coming."

"She knows already, I suspect," Ulaam said. "From what I know of her, she is probably looking forward to seeing how you deal with her defenses."

"Is it…possible to impress her so much with what we do that she lets Charlie go?"

"Unlikely," he said. "Best you can hope for is that she finds you amusing and sends you away with a particularly creative curse."

"So there's no hope."

"Well…"

Tress looked up.

"I am supposed to remain neutral, you see," he said, "in the actions of certain individuals such as the Sorceress. But there is someone who never follows those rules. He's on this ship. And he has a pair of bright red sequined briefs."

"Hoid," she said. "You've mentioned that he's…not what I think he is. Is he truly something greater than the Sorceress?"

"Well, these things are famously difficult to judge," Ulaam said. "But I should say yes. I wish you could know the real Hoid. As amusing as it has been to watch his current incarnation in all its splendor, he is normally quite different from the person you know."

"And that person is…less embarrassing?"

"Well, usually more embarrassing. But also quite adept at certain things. If there is a single person on the entire planet who can defeat the Sorceress and get you and yours out alive, it is that man.

I tell no joke or exaggeration in this, Tress. When he wants to, there are few people in the entire cosmere who can influence events like our dear friend with the inappropriate undergarments."

I'll have you know I owned those briefs before the curse, and I stand by the purchase.

Tress considered that. Then she finally tried her tea, which alone proved her bravery. I never drink anything Ulaam gives me without first seeing what it does to the houseplants.

"If he's so powerful," Tress said, "how did the Sorceress end up cursing him?"

"I have no idea," Ulaam said. "But it's not *that* surprising. For how capable he is, Tress, he often overreaches in some way. It doesn't matter how powerful a person is, if they believe they are slightly *more* powerful than they truly are, there's room between those margins for big errors. Hmmmm?"

Yeah, that one was fair.

"Regardless," Ulaam said, "I think in this case, what happened to him wasn't an accident. If I were to lay down money—or, more valuable, my favorite set of fingernails—I'd guess he got cursed on purpose. And is now having more trouble than expected getting out of it."

"Why?" Tress said. "Why would he get cursed on *purpose*?"

"I haven't been able to decide," Ulaam replied.

Tress was skeptical. But in this case, Ulaam was (unfortunately) right. I had honestly thought I would have sorted through this by now. It was…proving more difficult than I'd anticipated.

Fortunately, I was close. Closer than ever. Because Tress hit on the most important idea right then.

"So…" Tress said, "maybe I *don't* have to defeat the Sorceress. Maybe I just have to find a way to get *Hoid* to do it."

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps indeed."

Tress excused herself, then wandered to her quarters. There she dug under the bed and brought out her collection of cups. It had been so long since she'd admired them. The part of her that enjoyed them hadn't changed, but she just…didn't have the time she'd once had. Really, these days she'd only been using the big metal one. It was the one that wouldn't break if it dropped off the table when the ship swayed.

Still, she took them out one at a time and placed them on the counter. Last of all she got out the ones Charlie had sent her. She

stared in particular at the one with the butterfly soaring across the ocean. She'd originally assumed the butterfly had to be forced into such a terrible situation. Why else would it fly out over the spores?

She saw it differently now. Perhaps it was simply a butterfly who knew what it wanted—and was willing to try to get it, no matter how impossible.

It wasn't a suicidal butterfly. It was a determined one.

She put away the other cups, but kept this one out, along with the pewter tankard. These were her two favorites. One a symbol of determination. The other a solid and heavy practical device—almost a weapon.

I, she thought, *am these two cups.* One side utilitarian, one side dreaming. Opposites. Yet both served the same function. Remarkable.

That butterfly, though, had gone out on the ocean alone. It hadn't brought an entire crew with it to die. She took a deep breath and tied her hair back, then took the two cups and stalked out onto the deck.

"Salay," she said to the helmswoman, "I've changed my mind. I want you to set down the launch. I'm going to take it into the Midnight Sea. Alone."

THE MONSTER

The objections were mountainous.

"Alone?" Salay said. "Captain, what moon gave you such a lunatic idea?"

"I'll go with you," Ann said. "I can keep you safe. I've got six pistols on me, and four eyes to aim them with now!"

Even Laggart, hovering about the back of the group of officers, seemed concerned.

Fort just held up his board. **Why?** he asked.

"I want to try the experiment with the Midnight Essence," Tress said. "See if I can actually control or destroy the monsters—because if I can't, there's no moving forward and all of this is moot. I will try it alone, as there's no reason to bring the rest of you. There's nothing you can do."

"I think this is a bad idea, Captain," Salay said, folding her arms. "I won't let you go into another sea alone."

"Am I not the captain?" Tress asked. "Can I not make this decision?"

"You can," Salay said. "But you *shouldn't*."

Irony is a curious concept. Specifically, I mean the classical definition: that of a choice leading to an opposite outcome from what is intended. Many grammarians bemoan the word's near-constant misuse—second only in dictional assassination to the way

some people use the word “literally.” (Their use of which is ironic.)

I’m not one of those people who care if you use words wrong. I prefer it when words change meaning. The imprecision of our language is a feature; it best represents the superlative fact of human existence: that our own emotions—even our souls—are themselves imprecise. Our words, like our hearts, are weapons still hot from the forging, beating themselves into new shapes each time we swing them.

Yet irony is an intriguing concept. It exists only where we want to find it, because for true irony, expectation is key. Irony must be noticed to exist. We create it from nothing when we find it. But unlike other things we create, like art, irony is about creating *tragedy*.

Irony is reversal. Set up, then collapse.

A perfect bit of irony is a beautiful thing.

So watch. Enjoy.

“I cannot let myself create more hardship for any of you,” Tress said. “I need to do this next part alone.”

Salay sighed softly—the kind of sigh you make when you’re trying not to yell, but need to give your lungs something to do. She nodded to the side. “Can we speak in private a moment, Captain?”

Tress nodded, and the two of them stepped away.

“I have another suggestion,” Salay said. “We sail the *Crow’s Song* in a little way and skirt the edge of the border for a while. Try to attract one of these monsters. Then we trap it with verdant spores and haul it on board. From there, we can retreat to the Crimson and take our time experimenting on it.”

“Too dangerous,” Tress said.

“More dangerous than you going in alone?”

“Too dangerous,” Tress revised, “for all of *you*. This is something I have to do, but I can’t let you keep risking yourselves.”

“Captain,” Salay said, her tone softening, “Tress. My entire life changed when you returned from the dragon’s den. I’ve been searching for Father for…for so long. I hoped for such a long time that hope started to wither. I was simply doing what I’d done because I was afraid to let it fully die.

“It’s alive again now. Watered by you, nurtured back to life. He’s *alive*. And I know where he is. I *need* to survive what’s coming next so I can get to him.”

“Then go,” Tress said softly. “You need to live to save him. You

can't take risks."

"I need a good crew to get through these seas," Salay said.

"This *is* a good crew."

"It was one," Salay said, "and can be one again. But Tress, do you know what it does to a person's soul to serve someone like Crow? You build up a black crust. Like toast left too long in the oven." She nodded to the crew gathered on deck. "I put you in charge for several reasons. One is that I think you'll be a good captain. But another is that they need someone to lead them who can set things right again. Someone who didn't agree to Crow's demands. They need *you*."

Tress nodded, understanding a shade better. Salay taking over would be a little like a team taking a time-out to reassess their strategy. Giving the ship to Tress was like tearing down the stadium to build a new one.

"Ever since you came on this ship," Salay said, "you've done nothing but try to protect and help us. The crew knows it. They'll follow you. *I'll* follow you. But I can't save my father yet. Can't save…myself yet. Not until I help you and this crew. So, I'm asking. Let me help you right now."

"Why ask?" Tress said. "Why not demand?"

Salay shook her head. "We mutinied against Crow. We can't afford to let that kind of behavior be seen as normal. We have to make it clear that disobeying Crow was an extreme exception.

"So we'll follow you. Exactly. The officers and I, we'll model for the others, because we know if we don't…well, that's when things on ships can go extra poorly. When exceptions become habits. So if you tell us to let you do this alone, we *will* let you, Tress. We have to."

She met Tress's eyes with one of those looks full of implication.

That never works as well as you think it might.

Because Tress had learned the wrong lesson. She'd heard the part about helping the crew. About protecting them. And so, she doubled down.

"Thank you, Salay," Tress said. "Now, please prepare the launch. I will be going alone into the Midnight Sea to test my theories about controlling the spore monsters there."

The sigh this time was accompanied by a barely contained growl, like Salay had swallowed something angry and furry.

Speaking of which.

Tress returned to her cabin to grab her hat before heading out for her experiment. And when she did, a voice spoke from the corner.

"Take me," Huck said.

Tress froze, then turned toward his cage.

"Bring me," he said. "I heard you speaking. Take me in the cage, if you must. But *bring me with you*, Tress. On that boat. You might need me."

She nearly dismissed him. But something about his voice…the tone of it perhaps... She pulled on her hat, wavered for a moment, but then decided. As she left, she grabbed his cage by the handle on the top and carried it with her as she swept out onto the deck.

And so, soon afterward, Tress found herself in a rowboat, the Midnight Sea surrounding her in all directions. Accompanied by only a caged rat, a keg of water, and a couple of free-range cups. It was time to see if she could get past the Sorceress's first line of defense. To see if she could conquer the terrible tar monsters that roamed the Midnight Sea. It was a tense, dramatic moment—that unfortunately the terrible monsters forgot to attend.

Surely they'd be along any moment now.

Tress continued to drift alone in all that blackness. The sea was *warm*, gorged on sunlight as it was. Somehow it felt even more alien than the Crimson Sea. She might have thought black spores would be more familiar. The world turned black for roughly half the day, every day. It was a natural color.

Yet sitting there, she felt as if her tiny boat were hanging in a void. A vast nothing. Even the sound of the seethe making the spores ripple wasn't comforting. It *sounded* wrong here. Upon this persistent night. Upon this gluttonous expanse that ate the very sunlight.

And now the sun was going down. Tress turned and looked backward longingly—but she had rowed herself out here for a good hour or so. Her arms were burning as proof.

The *Crow's Song* wasn't even visible, nor was the Crimson Sea. She was alone. Except for Huck, who huddled in his cage, quiet and terrified—despite having demanded he be brought along. To pass the time, Tress tried writing a little in her notebook. But she was too worried, too distracted. It wasn't only the thought of the Midnight Essence, but the fact that the spores were so close. Churning and bubbling right outside the hull of her boat.

She tried looking up at the sky, but as she did, the sun sank

behind the moon on the horizon. The Midnight Moon, like a hole in reality.

So she waited. There are few things worse than stressful—yet empty—time. Free time that you can't use in any way always feels like nature itself is mocking you.

Finally though, Tress spotted movement.

The Midnight Essence had gotten alarmingly close to her without being noticed. Perhaps because it was black upon black, though the fact that it was moving *through* the spores also helped hide its approach. Once she spotted it though, she tracked it easily—for it reflected the light of her lamp like oil.

Her breath caught. She stopped worrying about the spores, fixated only upon this approaching horror. What kind of beast moved *through* the spores? Bathing in them? Or…swimming? Was that the right term?

Tress knew the word from one of Charlie's stories, though she found the idea remarkable. There were places with so much water that you could go in over your head? Wouldn't you sink and drown?

Whatever the word, the creature approaching was doing it. You might have recognized the Midnight Essence as resembling some kind of eel or sea serpent, perhaps half as long as the *Crow's Song* was. But you come from a world where things live in the water; that idea was wholly alien to Tress, and so she found the beast's movements unnatural, unnerving. A spine should not move in such a way, like a piece of string, bending with supple contours.

It circled her boat, predatory. Also confused.

Why was this human sitting out here alone in a little boat? You'd have felt similar if you'd been strolling through the woods and found a warm steak dinner chilling on a stump. What kind of trick was this?

To this day, I can't completely say if Midnight Essence is alive or

not. The Luhel bond is an odd one, to be certain. For the context of the story though, pretend that the thing slinking along outside her boat was functionally self-aware. At the very least, it had been given a specific set of commands that approximated life.

And so, it knew to be cautious. This gave Tress the opening she needed. With a trembling hand, she reached out and touched the thing as it swam past.

This was, in the thing's perception, deeply unsettling. There it was, an eldritch monster of nefarious design, imbued with a hatred for all life. It had spent its entire existence seeking out ships, then growing legs to slip on board and consume those inside. When people saw it, they made all kinds of noises—though each one ended up as a painful gurgle. That was the sound of a job well done, an existence fulfilled.

People feared it. They *didn't* reach out to touch it. That was basically like a salami standing up and trying to jump into your mouth. It isn't that you don't like a good salami, but you should at least have to work for it.

Also, there was the mind control.

Tress had bet everything on being able to do what she had earlier—and seize control of this thing.

It was more credible a plan than you might think. You see, there was too much sea to cover for the Sorceress to pay attention to each creature individually. She made them in batches, then sent them out with orders, maintaining only a loose control. Indeed, if she'd tried to actively direct all of these things, even she would have been quickly dehydrated and killed.

Beyond that, the creatures had just enough self-awareness to make decisions. To choose. That's a dangerous feature to build into your roaming minions, but again, the Sorceress didn't have another option. She had to give them a measure of autonomy, lest they be incapable of doing the job for which she'd designed them.

So yes. Tress's plan could have worked.

If she'd been sprouting for more than a couple of weeks.

Tress tried to seize control as she'd done earlier, pressing her mind against it. The thing reared up out of the spores, pulling away from her hand, and looked at her with midnight eyes. A question came into her head, like…it wanted something. She tried to offer water, hoping it was more than the Sorceress was giving.

The thing rebuffed her. Naturally, the Sorceress knew of this

possibility. She understood the weakness inherent in her creations. And she'd built them, with complex mechanisms, to recognize an outside attempt at control. Tress was tenaciously talented and demonstrably determined. But she was still new.

And the Sorceress, it should be noted, was *not*.

The thing reared up with a hiss, opening its mouth, anticipating its feast. Tress threw herself to the bottom of the boat, terrified.

When a small, high-pitched voice spoke.

"Stop," Huck said. Then, sounding reluctant, he continued, "Take us to your mistress. I…have free passage."

The creature swayed its head, the complex sets of commands that guided it converging on the owner of that voice. One it had been instructed not to eat. One it was to bring to its master when commanded.

Huck the rat had returned to the place where he'd been created, as instructed by the Sorceress.

The next morning, Tress arrived at the Sorceress's island.

She'd been allowed a drink and the use of the facilities (a chamber pot) on the little rowboat. But otherwise she'd spent the trip wrapped in the coils of the Midnight Essence. Immobile. Two others just like it had emerged from the spores to push the boat, with incredible speed, to its destination.

Huck refused to answer her demands for explanations of what he'd done, or why the creatures listened to him. But Tress had her suspicions.

So it was that after an incredible journey, Tress finally arrived at the Sorceress's island. And found it smaller than she'd envisioned. This is notable, as the island Tress came from was already small by the standards of most worlds. So her surprise was akin to a four-year-old remarking, "You know, I expected you to be more mature."

As the spore seas lack the fine silicates derived from coral refined by ichthyological digestive processes (yes, your favorite beaches are fish poop), the Sorceress's island was merely another pile of rocks rising from the spores. In this case, the slate-grey stone skerry was suspiciously circular, and perhaps two hundred yards wide.

A few trees tried to spruce up the landscape but failed, both by being too intermittent and by not being the right species. Instead they were spindly, gnarled things with tufts of leaves growing only at the very tips of their branches. As if they knew the concept of "trees" only by description, and were doing their best, all things considered.

Tress had spent the trip alternating between hating Huck and hating herself. With the most generous helping heaped on herself. Now she sat, wrapped in the coils of the Midnight Essence, watching with dread as they approached the island. The Midnight Essence, it should be noted, now looked less like an eel and more like a pile of verdant vines.

The boat had a line of silver in the hull, which left dead spores trailing them in a dissipating wake. The creature took care not to touch the silver, but—like Tress had noticed when she'd seen through the eyes of the Midnight Essence rat—could get close to it without being destroyed.

It had unlocked Huck's cage. He sat on one of the plank seats, near the front of the boat. Spores crunched and rustled as the two midnight creatures pushed the little craft steadily forward.

"You *have* been here before," Tress said, voicing her guesses. "All that talk of growing up in a community of rats—that was all lies, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Huck whispered.

"You belong to her," Tress said. "You're a familiar of the Sorceress, or something like that. You've *always* belonged to her."

"Yes," he said, even softer.

Each answer hit like an arrow. The barbed kind that hurt going in—but also rip and tear going out. The kind that make you want to leave them in, walking around with wounds that can never heal, for fear of the worse pain of removal.

Still, as much as that stung, she forced herself to admit something. Huck had done everything he could—short of abandoning the ship at port—to keep her from coming this way. To protect her from the Sorceress.

He had lied, yes, but he was obviously terrified of the Sorceress. She couldn't blame him too much for how he acted, now that she'd unwittingly brought him back here. She could, however, blame herself.

She should have been smarter, come up with another plan.

Maybe she should have taken Salay's advice, and let the crew help with the problem? Tress wavered on a precipice as she thought about that.

Change has an illusory aspect to it. We pretend that big changes hang on single decisions, single moments. And they do. But single decisions and single moments, in turn, have a mountain of smaller decisions behind them. You can't have an avalanche without a mountain of snow, even if it begins with one bit starting to tumble.

Don't ignore the mountains of minutes that heap up behind important decisions. That was happening to Tress right at that moment. Full realization hadn't dawned yet, but the glow was on the horizon.

The midnight monsters steered the boat in an odd way as they approached the island, and Tress soon observed why. Long, jagged lines of stone cut up through the sea here, like sandbars with teeth. The Sorceress had chosen her island deliberately; the approach to the place was exceptionally treacherous. Hidden rocks lay like mines, barely peeking through the seething spores, giving almost no hint to their locations.

Approaching, then, was nearly impossible. As the boat made a sequence of expert maneuvers—steered by monsters who knew the correct path by magical gift—Tress felt her stomach drop. This was a protection to the island they hadn't known about. Huck hadn't told them of it, perhaps with nefarious intent. (In fact he simply forgot, but that's beside the point.)

If the *Crow's Song* had arrived and tried to sail up to the island, it would have surely ripped its hull to pieces and died upon the spores. Her mission here had been doomed all along.

Eventually their little boat—a lone speck of color skimming the top of the void—navigated to shore. Here Tress could make out the legion of golden metal men standing in ranks around the Sorceress's tower. Outfitted with spears and shields, Tress could almost imagine them as men in armor with lowered faceplates. If only they hadn't stood so unnaturally still.

Other than the lonely trees and the hundred metal men, the island's only feature was the tower itself. This, in contrast to the size of the island, was much larger than Tress had anticipated. Wide and tall, with a peaked top, Tress was too modest to say out loud what it resembled. I, of course, don't know what modesty feels like —so when *I* mentioned what it looked like, the Sorceress asked me

if I'd like a large yonic symbol splitting my forehead.

Tress had hoped for a way to escape once the boat landed, but the creature kept her wrapped tightly, lifting her and carrying her before itself as Huck hopped off the boat. On the stone ground, he looked toward Tress. The first time he had looked directly at her since they'd gotten on the little boat.

She glared back at him. He wilted visibly, like a vine without enough water. Then, however, he perked up—as if deciding something. "Yes. Yes, that's it," he said. "Not doing what she asked at all."

He eyed the monster, then scampered forward before Tress could berate him again. They crossed the ground to the tower itself, the metal men letting them pass. The things seemed to be asleep at the moment, in Tress's estimation. Merely statues.

The tower soon took her attention. It was an awe-inspiring sight, more silver in one place than she'd ever seen before. There was so much of it, in fact, that it would destroy spores at an incredible rate. Protection against enemy sprouters.

A door was built into the side of the tower, apparently also made of silver. Huck stood up in front of it, and in a loud voice, spoke. "As I was commanded, I've returned to the tower with a captive to present to the Sorceress. Magic door, please open! Uh, I was told—"

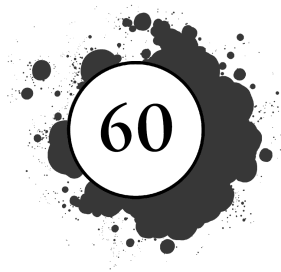
The door swung open on its own.

"Right," he said. "Good." He scurried in, then looked down at himself, then back at Tress. Uncertain what would happen next.

The midnight monster—now looking like a large centipede with tentacles for feet—let Tress go and shoved her through the door into the tower. It couldn't follow, because of the silver. Instead it tossed her something. Her cups. The pewter one and the one with the butterfly. It had brought them—because it had found them in the boat and didn't know if they were important or not.

As Tress fumbled to catch her cups, the door slid shut. Locking her inside and leaving her with only one choice.

To proceed. And meet her destiny.



Tress took a moment to reorient herself, taking a deep breath, rubbing her arms—and trying to brush free the touch of the strange midnight creature. She thought of grabbing Huck, but he was quickly vanishing up a set of steps—using the running board alongside them as a ramp.

Tress stayed still for the moment. She'd entered an all-metal corridor, decorated only by a red carpet down the middle like a tongue. It was inlaid with symbols that a well-traveled person would recognize as Aonic, but that Tress saw as some kind of arcane rune. Which wasn't too far off.

The walls—instead of being lined with pictures or tapestries—bore several panels that reminded Tress of Fort's writing board. Now, many storytellers would describe such a hallway with words like cold and sterile. That's mostly due to past association. The calm, pure white lights in the ceiling—diffused through a plastic filter—might remind you of an office building, while the unadorned metallic finish might remind you of a hospital operating room.

To Tress, the room wasn't cold. It wasn't stoic, or bleak, or stern—or any words that might describe a politician at his trial after he escapes the dumpster.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "So clean and so radiant. Like I imagine the afterlife."

Her words echoed in the corridor. Finally, she took a long breath. She was here. She wasn't dead. Perhaps…perhaps she could find a way to rescue Charlie. Despite everything. This *was* where she'd been pointed her entire voyage, after all.

So, scraping together what was left of her determination, she strode forward and up the steps. At the top, a door opened on its own, sliding to the side. Because the Sorceress had very particular ideas about what the interior of this kind of vessel should be like.

Beyond the door, Tress entered a large, circular room with doors at the sides. The chamber had a lived-in look, decorated with the kinds of things that would make a mess if the Sorceress had to leave in haste. Furniture, bookshelves. The floor was still metal—inscribed with a map of the planet—and the lights were still industrial, but she made it look cozy.

The woman herself sat at her desk near the bookshelves, holding a fluffy white cat and idly doing something on her laptop. Or, I mean, her "magical seeing board" that let her watch events outside, as well as occasionally play a mystical card game to pass the time.

Her skin glowed, and she had a silvery effervescence to her. She was maybe in her fifties—rather, that was how old she'd been when she'd stopped aging—and she'd come a long way from the withered husk she'd once been. Short, a little plump, she liked keeping her hair in a bun for convenience and abhorred makeup. I mean, I would too, if I literally glowed. Her kind tended to prefer clothing and other accents that didn't distract from their luminous nature.

Though she was a long, long way from home, she was extremely powerful. She rotated in her chair, setting her mystical board on the table, then shooing her cat off her lap. It hopped onto the floor, then eyed Huck—who cowered on the desk. The Sorceress pointed, and the cat slunk toward the door, slipping past Tress and out.

Tress was paying little heed, as she was mesmerized by the various seeing boards on the desk. One showed a view of the hallway where Tress had entered. Several other panels on her desk showed things like shots of the island—but one of them depicted the deck of the *Crow's Song*.

"Ah!" the Sorceress said, standing up. She glanced at Huck, who shied down before her gaze. "So this is her. Your offering. I have to say, I'm not impressed. She seems scrawny. And that hair! Girl, I know your planet is rather unimportant, but surely your people have invented *hairbrushes*."

Tress swallowed. To her, the woman looked deific. It was the glowing skin. Really helps you land a good first impression. I've been envious of that look for centuries now, and have been aiming to adopt it.

In fact, that is what this has all been about. But I get ahead of myself.

Tress shoved down her awe and cobbled together her ramshackle plan. She drew herself up, clutching her cups for strength, and spoke. "Sorceress! You have taken captive someone I love. I have come to demand his return."

"Demand?" she asked. "What makes you think you can demand anything of me?"

"Because I," Tress proclaimed, "have defeated you."

"Defeated me?" the woman asked, amused, glancing at Huck.

"I've crossed your ocean," Tress said, "approached your island, passed your metal army, and gained entrance to your lair. I have overcome the four trials you've put before me, and have obtained your presence."

"Ha!" the Sorceress said. "My four trials? I love it. You've been listening to Hoid. Tell me, how is Ulaam?"

"Er…" Tress looked at Huck, who was wringing his paws. "He's… fine, my lady. He seems happy on the *Song*, at least."

"All this time," she said, "and he's never come to see me. Wise, I suppose. He knows I keep a vat of acid just for him. It's one of the only ways to be sure about them, you know. That or a good fire."

The Sorceress strolled through the center of the circular room, walking across the map of the world inscribed on the floor. Offworlders called the place Lumar, which is a pretty good translation of the name used by several native languages. Tress had never seen a map of it so detailed, but there was a lot to take in, so she didn't spare much thought for it.

The Sorceress stepped right up to Tress. Obviously unafraid of physical altercation.

"So," Tress said. "I've defeated you…"

The Sorceress grinned. "Did you *really* think that would work, dear? Pretending you got captured on purpose to get past my defenses?"

Tress swallowed, then went for her backup idea. "I…um…I want to make a trade with you. I have a flare gun. It shoots bullets that create explosions of spores."

“Yes, I’ve seen,” the Sorceress said, gesturing to her viewing boards. One of which still depicted the *Crow’s Song*—and the image was wobbling, moving…and there were some fingers at the side of the image, gripping it…

Fort’s board, Tress realized. *That’s a view from his board, facing outward. The Sorceress has been using it to spy on us.*

Indeed she had. If I’d been in my right mind, I’d have realized ages ago that the security protocols were off by default, letting the things be hacked quite easily. The Sorceress had been watching this entire time, save for the short period where Fort had been between boards. She’d stopped paying quite so much attention to the *Crow’s Song* once Tress left.

“My gun,” Tress continued. “It’s a design I made, known nowhere in the rest of the seas. I want to trade you the designs. In exchange for the return of Charlie, the man I love.”

“You think,” the Sorceress asked, “that with all the advanced technology at my disposal, I’d be interested in your spore gun? A type of weapon that is already being manufactured in several seas on this very planet, which simply hasn’t made its way to your ocean yet?”

Tress’s resolve had already been crumbling. Now it all-out collapsed. She looked to Huck, who—strangely—raised a paw toward her in a little fist. Encouraging her.

Something else was going on here, Tress realized. Something she hadn’t grasped yet. She began thinking back through the events that had led her to this point. Huck had been able to demand the midnight monster bring her to the island. The Sorceress seemed intrigued by her and her crew. They were worth noticing and watching. Why?

Hoid, Tress thought. *Hoid can defeat her. She’s been watching* him.

So how did Huck fit into this? And why was the Sorceress chatting with Tress instead of locking her away?

Tress hadn’t known what to anticipate in a confrontation with this woman. But a civil conversation certainly hadn’t been it. It made Tress feel terribly *un*certain.

The Sorceress turned and walked toward her desk. “Well, child, I don’t need your technology, but I find you intriguing. Seslo, please open the bridge’s holding chamber.”

“As you wish,” a monotone voice said. It was the spirit that inhabited this place, you see, obeying the will of its owner. Yes, like

the speaking minds inhabiting the ships you've seen landing on your planet.

One of the doors at the side of the room clicked audibly, then swung open. Behind it was Charlie.

He looked a little worse for wear. He had on one of his formal outfits, one Tress had seen him in when making appearances with his father, but it was rumpled and torn in a few places. Otherwise, he looked exactly as she remembered him, with hair that didn't comb straight and a wide grin.

"I knew you'd come," he said, rushing over to Tress. "I knew you would! Oh, Tress. You've saved me!"

At this moment, Tress's emotions were complicated. Like that rope you always swear you put away neatly, but which comes out of storage looking like someone used it to invent new theoretical types of knots that bend space-time.

It was Charlie. Seeing him was incredible. That made her happy, and also relieved. Celebratory, overwhelmed, excited, grateful—yes, all of that. All the emotions you would expect were present and accounted for.

But she also felt a sadness she couldn't explain. (We'll get to it.) And in addition, confusion. Suspicion. That was it? Was she truly just going to get what she wanted?

"I will trade him," the Sorceress said, "for those two cups."

"What, really?" Tress asked.

"Really," the Sorceress said. "Simply leave them on the shelf by the door."

"Is he…ensorcelled in any way?" Tress asked.

"Oh, that. I should play the part, shouldn't I? Ahem.

"Under shining bulb,
With mighty gulp,
I make it felt
That I break this spell."

Barbarian. She does that to annoy me.

It was exactly the sort of thing that Tress expected to hear though. Arcane nonsense—comfortingly mystical. Charlie put his hand to his head, then leaned down and gave her a brief kiss.

That made Tress's emotions twist even further.

"See, rat?" the Sorceress said. "I told you, didn't I?"

Huck, on the desk, bowed his head.

"Say it," the Sorceress continued. "Say it, rat."

"You were right," he whispered, almost inaudibly. He slunk away from the desk, dropping to the floor. Vanishing.

Tress took hold of her emotions, slapped them sensible, and sent them to stand in an orderly line. There would be time to deal with them later. For the moment, she made a decision.

It was time to leave. She grabbed Charlie by the hand, put her two cups on the shelf by the door, then hurried out and onto the stairs.

Charlie took it all in stride, starting a rather boring story about his days in captivity that I won't tediously repeat here. Particularly since he soon moved on to other comments. "Oh, Tress," he said, "won't it be so nice to get back to our normal lives on the Rock again? Won't it be so nice to go back to pies, and window washing, and gardening?"

It was here—right at the bottom of the steps, listening to those questions from Charlie—-that Tress's sadness assaulted her. It fought dirty, you see, as sadness usually does. Going for the kidneys. Or the heart.

Charlie didn't seem like he'd changed at all. That was good. She'd worried his captivity would have left him mentally scarred. But here he was, perky and excitable as always. He could have given lessons to puppies on how to be properly enthusiastic. Good old Charlie. Same as ever.

Tress was not the same.

She'd changed *so* much in the course of her time away from the Rock. She found she didn't care about pies, or window washing, or even cups in the same way. She cared about spores, and what she could do with them. About sailing, and her crew.

All of this…all of this meant she couldn't go back to being the same person. She, you see, *had* been scarred.

There it is! Irony. The very journey she'd taken to find what she wanted had transformed her into a person who could no longer enjoy that victory. She looked into Charlie's eyes, and her emotions parted asunder, bowing before her building sense of melancholy. Crowning it queen.

In that moment, looking into Charlie's eyes, she thought of someone else. Someone Tress shouldn't have cared for, on paper. That's one thing we get wrong far too often in stories. We pretend

that love is rational, if we can only see the pieces, the motivations.

Charlie grinned. It was such a familiar grin. Perfectly like him.

She didn't believe it. That smile was one step too far. Because she *knew* Charlie.

Tress turned, ran up the steps, and burst into the main room, startling the Sorceress—who was settling down into her seat. Full of electric defiance, Tress shouted, "That is *not* Charlie."

The Sorceress hesitated.

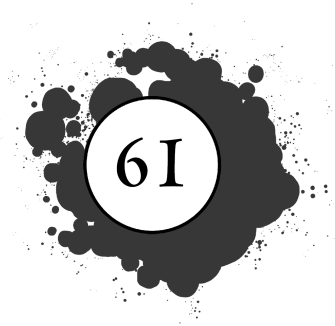
"You like to torment people," Tress said, pointing at the Sorceress and stalking forward. "You curse them with the worst curses you can imagine, *tailored* to the individual and their pains. You didn't keep Charlie here."

"And what," the Sorceress said, "do you think I did with him?"

"You turned him into a rat," Tress said.

Ha! Finally.

THE MAN



Tress kept striding forward, step by step, toward the Sorceress. “Each time I tried to get Huck to talk about this place, or you, he stammered. He searched for words. Because a spell was preventing him from speaking things that would let me know he was Charlie, cursed.”

“If that is so,” the Sorceress said, “then how could he have told you about the defenses here? I know he did. I know many things, child.”

Tress stopped, and her eyes widened. “Because when he told me…he was trying to get me to stay away…” She focused on the Sorceress. “Because me coming here is the way to break the curse, isn’t it? Moons! You cursed him, and said the only way to break it was for *him* to bring *me* here, to you! That’s why he tried *everything* to stop me. Because…because he loves me.”

The room fell still save for one sound. Sniffling.

Tress approached the desk and found Huck the rat behind it. He looked up at her, his eyes red. Unlike the doppelganger she’d been given, Huck was a mess. Shivering and crying as he curled up in a ball.

Tress knelt. “Charlie…”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t want her to be right. She told me I’d end up bringing you here so she could play with you. I tried

not to follow her prophecy, but I'm stupid, Tress. Stupid and worthless. You deserve so much better. Look at all you've done, and I couldn't even manage one thing to keep you safe…"

"Oh, Charlie," she whispered, picking up the rat, cradling him. He trembled, his eyes squeezed shut.

The desk rolled to the side at an offhand whim of the Sorceress. She now stood in the dead center of the room. The fake Charlie had walked up to the doorway, and the Lightweaving had fallen away, revealing a creature that only resembled a human—reptilian with golden eyes and a toothy grin.

My best guess is that she wanted to plant someone on the *Crow's Song* to deal with me more permanently. I suspect she was beginning to worry about our bet. And the fact that someone so close to me had been able to get into her fortress, even as a captive.

The Sorceress showed none of these emotions. Instead she tossed aside her amiable air. Her eyes grew hard as stones. Her lips drew to a line. She didn't like that Tress had seen through this ruse. In addition, something else bothered her. Something that might be obvious to you. If not, it will be revealed in a moment.

Tress was oblivious as she cradled Charlie the rat. He'd indeed tried to tell her, several times. When he couldn't say his name was Charlie, he'd tried "Chuck." But the curse had only let "Huck" come out.

"Charlie," Tress whispered. "You sent me cups."

He looked at her. "That was a lifetime ago, Tress."

"I love them. Particularly the one with the butterfly on the sea. Like us, Charlie. Soaring over places we never thought to go. And the one made of pewter. Like us, Charlie. Stronger and more straightforward than we have a right to be."

"She has us though," he said. "Because of me, she has us both. She told me…the only way to be free was to bring her the person I loved, then give them to her to curse. She said she'd make me watch. Moons, it was excruciating, watching you sail ever closer. I should have tossed myself overboard. Then you'd have never learned how to get in…"

He trailed off as she held him up before her, meeting his eyes. "Charlie," she whispered. "I want this."

"I…"

"You remember what you told me? Before we parted?"

"Always," he whispered. "Always…what you want."

“I want *this*,” she said. “To be with you.”

He met her eyes, and found in them strength enough for two. Then his head cocked. The same thought occurred to the two of them simultaneously.

“Charlie,” she said, “if the way to break your curse was to bring the person you love to the Sorceress, why are you still a rat? Is it because… Is there someone else you love?”

“No!” he said. “It’s you. But…”

“It’s because,” the Sorceress said from behind them, “I haven’t cursed you yet. His torment can only be ended if he brings you to me for that specific purpose.”

Tress rose, holding Charlie in her palm, looking toward the Sorceress—who seemed to be another person. Same shape. Different soul. No jovial playfulness. Instead a cold monster. Some scholars say that when you become an immortal like the Sorceress or me, your soul gets replaced with something new. Like the fossilization process.

In her case, in lieu of a soul, the woman had pure ice. Kept cold and frozen by her heart.

In the face of this, Charlie—who had himself been changing, day by day, on this journey—spoke. “You’re wrong,” he said softly. “I’m still a rat, and will remain one. Because for my curse to be broken, I have to bring her to your home in trade for my freedom. I realized on the way in that I *haven’t* done that. I brought her, Sorceress, but not in trade. Not to get cursed. I brought her to *defeat* you.”

“Remarkable,” the Sorceress said. “I didn’t give you the intelligence of a rat, but it seems you’ve adopted it willingly. I can’t be defeated by—”

A red light appeared on her desk.

Several other lights appeared on the wall. Then several more. The Sorceress spun, surprised, commanding the soul of her building to show her what had tripped her alarms. A large screen appeared in the air beside one wall, depicting a ship crashing through the seething midnight spores.

As I said, she hadn’t been paying enough attention. If she had, she would have seen this coming.

Because the *Crow’s Song* had arrived.

THE HUNTER

How?

Let's jump back a day. To the crew, who had been waiting for Tress's safe return. A Doug posted on duty high atop the main mast had been able to see—through a spyglass—when Tress was taken. He'd scampered down to explain.

This put the crew in a bind. What did they do? They couldn't give chase through the Midnight Sea, could they? The very monsters that had taken Tress would claim them as well. They perhaps should have turned and tried to escape through the Crimson to safer spores. It was what Tress had said she wanted.

Instead they'd held an emergency meeting. And a solution had been offered. By Fort.

It was a chance for him to claim the title of the greatest hunter his people had ever known. A chance to hunt monsters made from midnight spores. The others had listened to his plan, then gone to the Dougs to propose it. The crew had voted unanimously in favor, save for Laggart.

So they'd sailed the Midnight Sea. Fifteen minutes in, the first midnight monsters had appeared. Three of them slithered up on deck, completely impervious to normal weapons, looking for warm bodies and blood to feast upon. For liquid, for water. For death.

Instead they found a large man standing at the center of the deck

surrounded by barrels of water. Each with a keg of spores suspended above it by a rope.

Welcome, he wrote to the three monsters—with Ann saying the words out loud in case the creatures couldn't read. **I have quite the deal for you today.**

The things slithered forward, making for him. In turn, Fort moved to cut one of the kegs free.

Careful, he warned as Dougs moved to do likewise. **We'll feed all this water to these other spores, leaving none for you, unless you take care.**

The midnight monsters stopped. They didn't need the words, as they could sense what a person was saying or meaning. Their essence reached out to people, seeking the Luhel bond. And so what Fort said registered on some level with them.

They communicated with one another by wiggling tentacles. And Fort…well, he understood. Not because he knew another sign language, but because of that same bond. They *did* want the water. But there were sources of blood on the ship, and that would do as well.

Warning, he said, gesturing to the rest of the crew, who had gathered with guns at the back of the ship. **If you don't stop, they're going to throw themselves overboard and feed their water to the spores. Other spores. Not you.**

This finally got through to the creatures. It was a conundrum. So much water. But…if they weren't careful…it would all go to someone else.

Fort rammed his hand into one of the barrels of water, then made signs with the other—signs the creatures understood because of the bond.

«I can feed you all of this,» he said. «All for you three.»

«How?» they signed back. «What will it take to be able to eat and drink and thrive and drink and drink and drink?»

«Protect us,» Fort said, «as we sail farther into the sea here.»

As I said, there's a flaw in using self-aware magical creatures as guards. This process was efficient, allowing the Sorceress to send them out in large numbers, although she couldn't spare much attention for them.

But midnight aethers are insatiable. And their inherent nature is to trade. To do a human's bidding in exchange for water and form. That left them highly susceptible to someone who understood the

mechanics of the magic—and had a mind for a good trade.

And thus, using the coordinates on the map that Tress had gotten out of me, the *Crow's Song* arrived at the island only half an hour after Tress had. Ready to rescue their captain.

It provided the exact distraction Tress needed in the moment. Because the Sorceress, reorienting to these new arrivals, needed to awaken her defenses. She began shouting orders—for the moment ignoring Tress and Charlie.

"They came for me," Tress said. "Those beautiful fools. They should have stayed away!"

"Like you should have stayed away?" Charlie said. "Instead of coming for me?"

Tress looked at him sitting in her palm, tears in her eyes. And the avalanche started to tremble. She realized that she was the fool. Not for coming to save Charlie—but for trying to keep others from following their own hearts in the same way.

"We have to do something," she whispered. "I need to warn them about the rocks under the spores. There has to be a way to talk to them."

Both of them looked at the Sorceress's desk—in particular, the magical board that displayed the image from Fort's similar one. Then, as the Sorceress was waking up her armies, Tress and Charlie grabbed the board and stared at it. Trying to figure out how to operate it.

"Uh," Charlie said. "Board? Can you please let us talk to the people you're showing us?"

"Video conferencing engaged!" the board said, happy to be of service.

Fort, who had been holding the board, stood up from his chair. He'd spent the entire night drinking water and feeding it—via the bond—to the three monsters. So he was both tired and feeling a little odd, as he'd been able to drink multiple barrels' worth but didn't feel full.

Still, their arrival had made him alert, and he'd sent the midnight monsters—now fully under his control by the strengthening of the bond—swimming away to fight others that had tried to get onto the ship. His always won those fights, of course, having far more water to build new body parts from the spores around them if wounded.

Regardless, he had a moment of peace. And could cock his head, frowning as the back of his board—which used to display words for

him—now showed Tress and the rat, huddled up close to the camera on their side.

"Fort?" Tress asked. "Can you see us?"

The words scrolled across the screen, obscuring the view a little.

I can! he typed, the words appearing underneath theirs but from the other side. He waved to the others, and in a moment Ann and Salay had joined him. Even I huddled up with them, curious.

"Captain?" Salay asked. "Captain! Are you well?"

"We're in the tower," Tress whispered. "How did you survive the spores? No, never mind that now. Explain later. Salay, you need to watch out. The sea here is full of rocks under the spores. They're extremely treacherous!"

"I'll watch for those," Salay said. "Thank you."

"You shouldn't have come here," Tress said. "If you try to sail through those rocks, you'll sink."

The three of them frowned. Then Salay asked simply, "Do you order us to turn around?"

Did she?

Could she?

Dared she?

In that moment, the decision was made. The rock tipped and the avalanche of change that had been building in Tress started tumbling down.

"No," Tress whispered. "Please help me."

The three of them grinned. I scratched my head. Because something about the place where Tress was standing, visible behind her, was familiar to me.

"We'll do it," Salay said. "We're coming."

"Don't get yourselves hurt!" Tress said.

"Captain," Ann said, "we're going to save you. Because you deserve it. You remember, you once told me somethin' that made me see the world in an entirely new way."

"And that was?" Tress asked.

"'Here, try on these spectacles.'"

Ann, Fort wrote, **that was almost as bad as one of Hoid's jokes.**

"It isn't just a joke though," Ann said, tapping her spectacles. "It's true. I see a new world. A world where we aren't condemned people any longer. A world where we've got ourselves a future."

"You know I'm not a King's Mask," Tress said. "I can't get him to pardon us."

"We'll find another way," Ann said, looking to the others, who nodded. "Because once we saunter up to the Sorceress herself and get away…well, I figure after we do that, we'll be able to do *anything*."

The three of them nodded to her, and she felt overwhelmed. By their loyalty, by her own (at long last) willingness to accept help. By…

Wait.

Within Tress's avalanche of emotions, something stood out. Prompted by how I, standing there with the other three, was trying to use my tongue to pick my nose.

Her thoughts were a curiosity, you might say.

A revelation, *I'd* say.

"Hoid," Tress said. "Hoid couldn't point out the way to the Sorceress. We had to guess the location by pointing to places other than this one. He could talk about all of those…"

And? Fort said.

"And I assumed the reason was because he couldn't talk about his curse," Tress said. "But the solution to Charlie's curse involved him returning to her. If Hoid couldn't show us the way here, at least not intentionally, then maybe the solution to his curse involves *him* coming here too."

She looked down at the floor.

A map of the world.

You must bring me to your planet, Tress.

"Yes…" Charlie whispered. "Hoid could talk about being cursed, once you knew about what had happened to him. He should have been able to easily mention the Sorceress and her island. But if he couldn't? That implies that doing so would help *break* the curse. His solution must involve getting back into the Sorceress's tower. Passing her tests…Tress, it makes sense!"

She looked up toward the others again, her eyes widening. "You need to bring him here. Into this room."

"The cabin boy?" Ann asked, frowning.

"Captain?" Salay said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Tress said. "Please. Bring him to me. I know it's hard, but *please*."

"Well, if you order it..." Salay said.

"Don't do it because I order it," Tress said. "Do it because you trust me."

The others nodded. They did trust her. Which was good, since the Sorceress had noticed what Tress was doing. Eyes wide with fury, the woman barked an order, shutting off their communication. She thrust her hands into the air, her fingers leaving trails of light as she constructed powerful runes. As she finished them with a flourish, a blast of light erupted from them and crossed the room, slamming Tress back against the wall and holding her there.

A crash and a clank sounded as two cups tumbled free of their perches. The one with the butterfly shattered. The other bounced, gaining a new dent.

The Sorceress turned back to mobilizing her armies. Charlie—who had been dropped as Tress slammed into the wall—picked himself up and scampered over to her, climbing her clothing. He tried to nibble at the lines of light to free her. It worked about as poorly as you might imagine.

"Charlie," Tress whispered.

He looked up at her, frustrated that glowing lines of light could be so strong. "I…I'm sorry, Tress. You can't rely on me. I'm useless. I'm failing again. I…"

"Charlie," she said, "there's something I've been meaning to tell you. I wish I'd said it earlier, so I'm going to say it now, although it's probably a terrible time for it. I love you."

"I feel the same," he said. "I love you too."

"Good. It would be very awkward if that turned out not to be the case." She struggled, then looked over at the *Crow's Song* on the screen, sailing toward the island. "Please, Charlie. I hate to impose. But if they fight through the defenses, they'll never get into the tower to rescue us."

Realization hit him. "I…I can open the door for them, Tress. *I can do that.*"

"If it's not too much trouble," she said.

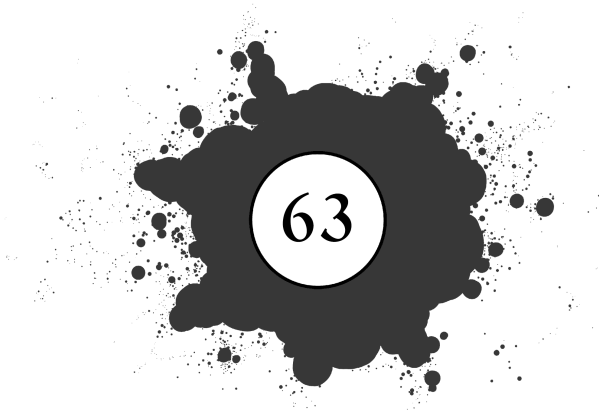
Yes, she'd changed. But even big events change us only a little at a time, and she *was* still Tress.

Charlie looked toward the room's open door, leading to the steps down to the outer door. Where the Sorceress's cat was prowling.

"It might be too frightening for Huck the rat," he said. "But I think perhaps Charlie the gardener is made of something stronger." He nuzzled up against Tress's cheek. "Thank you," he said, softer. "For coming to get me. I wish I could have told you earlier."

Then he leaped down to begin his quest.

THE PILOT



The Sorceress was not angry. Not yet.

Not even frightened. Not yet.

She was mostly annoyed. And admittedly a little worried.

She had thought I was handled. When I'd started across the Crimson, she'd watched not because she was afraid I'd actually reach her tower, but because she enjoyed seeing me inconvenienced. She thought maybe I'd get sent to the bottom of the ocean, and she figured that would be a delight to watch.

Now, somehow here I was. Surely I couldn't get past her defenses, not on a common boat. Yet she hadn't thought I'd pass the Crimson, or sail the Midnight. She now assumed I had somehow, despite my enormous hindrances, been behind the ship's survival of those dangers. She didn't realize that my true advantage has never been my uncommon intellect.

It's been my ability to find the right people and stick close to them.

Right then, I clung to the side of the *Crow's Song*—up on the quarterdeck, near the helmswoman's station. I had stolen Huck's tiny pirate hat, thinking he didn't deserve it. Which, strictly speaking, was wrong. Can you really be mad at a pirate for stabbing you in the back?

It looked much worse on me. So of course I wore it clipped in

place. I was grinning wildly, wind in my hair, eyes wide—because I figured they might dry out that way, and then I could stop blinking.

Salay spun the ship's wheel. She shouted orders to the Dougs, who worked their magic on the sails. The Sorceress was extremely confident in her defenses. Certain that no one could sail the passage between the rocks to her island.

She hadn't counted on a woman like Salay. Sailing with her father's final letter in her pocket, knowing that if she died on this sea, he would remain imprisoned by his debts forever. A woman who had just discovered a renewed purpose in life. A woman who had taken a bet on Tress, and had earned the lives of the crew in return.

A woman who would not back down when the lives of her friends were at stake. Pray you meet such a woman at least once in your life. Then pray you get out of her way quickly enough.

She held to the wheel as wood groaned, her will against that of the spores, and steered the ship past stones. Unblinking. I was impressed by that part.

"Why?" Ann said, holding the banister and walking up the steps toward me. "Hoid, why does Tress have this strange idea that you can be savin' her?"

"Probably," I shouted over the rush of wind and spore, "because I just realized I should take up painting! And the Sorceress will be scared of my talent!"

"You are so aggravating!" Ann said.

"Nonsense," I replied. "Your cabin, Ann! Feels like it could use something to spruce it up. Or, if trees won't fit, maybe some paintings of dogs wearing hats. Oh!" I looked at her, my eyes wild as a spray of black spores crashed up beside me while the ship navigated a near-impossible curve. "Oh, I've just had the *best* idea. I could paint the pictures on *velvet*."

"Why in the name of the Verdant Moon's own backside would you do somethin' like that?"

"To give them texture when you lick them, obviously," I said. "Really, you should think about things more before you ask stupid questions, Ann."

And she *should* have known better. She might not have been asking a stupid question, but asking a question of stupid is nearly as futile.

Salay was so far into her zone of focus, she didn't hear the

conversation. Back in the tower, the Sorceress paused to watch as the ship slipped among the rocks, drawing ever closer. A sailing ship is a strange thing to control—I'm sure some of you know. You often don't steer so much as ride the waves, winds, and currents. You need speed to maneuver, but motion is always both your enemy and your ally all at once. Too little, and you can't complete your turns. Too much, and you end up kissing the rocks.

That day though, the ship appeared to obey neither wave nor wind, spore nor shoal. The ship obeyed Salay, and for a short transcendent moment, we seemed not on a ship at all. We rode upon her willpower made manifest, dodging rocks by inches, leaning so far to the sides at times I thought for sure we'd capsize. She had an instinct for where those rocks were, based on how the spores churned. And she did it all with eyes straight forward, focused on her goal.

To the Sorceress's astonishment, we broke through the rocks into the island's small bay. She shook her head, moving from annoyance to genuine concern. Behind her, Lacy—the cat—screeched and pounced, causing the worried Charlie to retreat into the room. He tried to race down the stairs again, but was chased back.

The Sorceress gave another order, and her group of metal men marched forward, ready for battle. They, surely, would put an end to this farce. They'd always been her most secure form of defense.

"Cannonmaster!" Salay said on the ship. "Prepare arms!"

That meant Ann. She hurried to the front of the ship to her cannon. It was her chance at last. To prove herself, one way or another, a bespectacled spectacle.

She'd been practicing these last few days, enough to be worried. She didn't seem to be supernaturally bad at aiming any longer, but that didn't mean she was good. She was really, *really* worried about that. And about how, despite years of dreaming of this day, everything suddenly came down to her.

On the shore, the metal men marched in ranks, responding immediately to the Sorceress's orders. The color of burnished brass, each one seven feet tall and carrying a spear with a glistening tip, they were an intimidating sight. Their instructions (carefully conveyed by the Sorceress when Breathing life into them) were complex, careful, and meticulous.

They were far better servants than the scouts made from Midnight Essence. While they were on duty, they would form a

barrier to prevent any kind of landing. Even from the deck, wet firing rod in hand, Ann could see why the king's forces had never had any luck against them. Musket balls would bounce off them, and cannonballs…well, those might knock one of the creatures down and leave a dent. But they'd be up again soon after.

Tress's designs though—they would work. Ann's hand trembled anyway as she rammed the firing stick into the cannon and launched a cannonball. The metal men didn't flinch. In part because the cannonball went wide, smashing through a tree, bouncing along the stones, then vanishing into the spores in the near distance.

Sweating profusely from the stress, Ann loaded another cannonball. She didn't turn around and look at the crew. She knew what they were thinking. It wasn't only eyesight that had been Ann's problem. Something else was wrong with her.

And she was right.

But it wasn't bad luck, or some mystical curse. It was something far more mundane, but equally pernicious. Ann didn't miss just because she had poor eyesight. She missed because of *momentum*.

There's an opposite force in life to the avalanche Tress was feeling. There's always an opposition, you see. A Push for every Pull, an old adversary of mine always says. Sometimes the moments in our life pile up and become an unstoppable force that makes us change. But at other times they become a mountain impossible to surmount.

Everyone misses shots now and then. But if you become known as the person who misses—if you internalize it—well, suddenly every miss becomes another rock in that pile. While every hit gets ignored. Eventually you become Ann: arm shaking, sweat pouring down your face, clutched by the invisible but very real claws of self-fulfilling determination. Then you start missing not because your aim is bad, or your eyesight is poor, but *because* your arm is shaking and sweat is pouring down your face.

And because missing is what you do.

Dreading what she'd once loved, Ann raised the stick to the side of the cannon. A calm voice interrupted her.

"Hold your fire, shipmate Ann," Laggart said, one hand on the forestay rope to keep his balance as he squinted at the shore.

Ann hesitated.

"Three degrees to aft and one up, shipmate Ann," Laggart said, his voice calm and firm.

She hesitated only a moment, then began cranking the cannon as he indicated. The ship continued to rock in the shallow waves of the bay, moving alongside the shore.

"Hold," Laggart said as she put the firing rod in place. "Hold. *FIRE!*"

An explosion of spores and force blasted the cannonball on its way. As she'd imagined, it hit one of the metal men in the chest and knocked it down, but didn't destroy it. However, the vines that burst out grabbed and enveloped all the metal men nearby.

They, in turn, were completely flummoxed. On the ship, Ann took one step toward her mountain and found it quite a bit smaller than she'd imagined.

"Reload and reset," Laggart said.

"Reloading and resetting, sir!" Ann said, moving with an efficiency that would have impressed any naval officer.

"Two degrees up," Laggart said.

"Two degrees up!" she said. "And one to port!"

"Aye," Laggart said, surprised. "And one to port. Now hold. Hold…"

"Fire!" Ann said at the exact same moment he did.

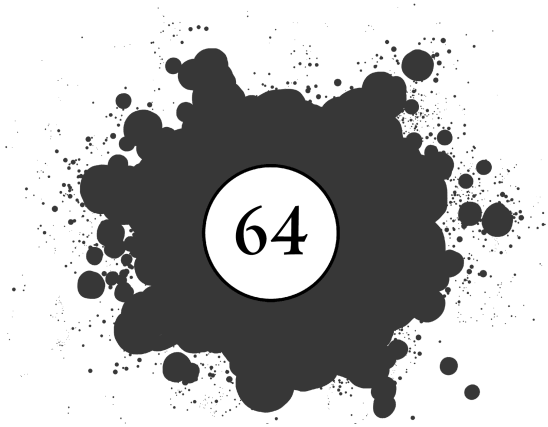
This shot flew true as well, catching another group of metal men.

"Reloading and resetting, sir!" Ann cried before he could give the order. She had the next blast off in quick succession. She looked to him, breathing quickly.

"Damn fine shooting," Laggart said, with a nod. "*Damn* fine. Assistant Cannonmaster."

And standing there on the summit of her mountain, Ann wondered at how tiny it suddenly seemed.

THE HERO



Back in the tower, Tress was still a captive.

It was humiliating, yes, but somehow…also gratifying? In that this was what she had expected to happen.

From the moment she'd launched from the Rock, she'd anticipated grand failure. She had gone not because she'd assumed she would succeed, but because something had to be done. And though many things had gone wrong on her quest, she'd somehow always managed to make them go right too.

She had found her repeated success almost *uncomfortably* consistent. In the same way that if you keep rolling sixes, you start to worry that something is wrong with the dice. Failing here, getting captured, being immobilized and unable to help…

Well, she wasn't *happy* about it. But a part of her *was* relieved. It had finally happened. As it should have. She wasn't a King's Mask or a pirate. She was a window washer. With hair that really needed to be pulled back into its tail, because she could barely see through it at the moment. Unfortunately, the Sorceress's bonds had locked her hands in those glowing bands of light, pressed to the wall.

Through her hair, she was able to watch the Sorceress's annoyance as the cannons completely immobilized her troops. This wasn't supposed to happen. She had designed the men to withstand cannon fire. She'd designed them to be unstoppable. They could

march right out into the ocean, and even had grappling hooks that let them climb aboard ships—often spearing them from underneath first, puncturing the hulls.

They were impervious to basically every weapon available to a preindustrial culture. Fearsome, destructive, deadly.

They didn't know what to do about vines though.

Even a semi-self-aware construct like an Awakened soldier relies on its instructions. They're far more versatile than something running on a traditional computer program, but they're also not fully alive. And these, confronted by vines holding them down, were baffled.

Their instructions told them not to be afraid of weapons brandished by interlopers. So they kept trying to march forward. The cannonballs continued to explode around them, causing more vines to spring out. When immobilized, the metal men had instructions to call for support. Normally that was a valid line of programming.

In this case though, it sent the entire group into chaos. They'd alternate from trying to march on the ship to trying to free one another, to locking up as they tried to decide what to do when neither was possible.

In short, the cannonballs worked.

Blessed moons, they *worked*.

Despite her situation, Tress couldn't help grinning as she saw *her* designs incapacitating an entire legion of supposedly unstoppable foes.

Charlie climbed up her leg, clinging to her trousers as the cat prowled below. He was puffing from exertion. "I…am having a little trouble with the beast."

"It's all right, Charlie," Tress said, still watching the cannon fire.

"Hey," he said, "don't you cry. There's a maritime law against that."

"Sorry," she said as another cannonball exploded, vines reaching out like some unholy hybrid of an octopus and a bag of lawn clippings. "It's just…they're beautiful."

A short time later the crew was on shore, running past the immobilized troops—Fort leading the charge, and carrying me overhead. I'll pretend it was in a dignified fashion.

But if Charlie didn't open the door, they'd be trapped outside the tower. And the story would end there.

Tress looked to Charlie. “I’m sorry. That in the end, we got captured. It’s like we said would happen, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “But Tress,” he said, “I remember another part of that conversation. Something about shining armor.”

“I don’t think they make armor in rat sizes, Charlie.”

Charlie saw something on the floor. His eyes narrowed. “Distract her,” he said. Then he drew upon every ounce of courage he had remaining—it wasn’t much, but when you’re in such a small body, courage (like booze) goes further than you expect.

Charlie leaped. The cat gave chase immediately, bearing down on him as he dashed for something lying on the floor near the stairs.

A large pewter tankard.

The Sorceress was turning her attention to the tower’s defenses. She might well have figured out what was happening if Tress hadn’t done as Charlie asked.

“Sorceress,” she said, “have you heard those stories? About the fare maiden who gets captured?”

“Thinking about your fate?” the Sorceress said, never one to pass on inflicting a little misery. “Thinking about how you traveled all this way only to end up in chains?”

“Yes,” Tress said. “And thinking that…well, it’s not that bad, actually.”

“Not that bad!” the Sorceress said, stalking forward, ignoring the clinking sound from behind—like something metal going down the steps. “Dear, you’re powerless! You wanted to save your love, but can’t even save your own self! You thought yourself a powerful pirate, yet here you are. At the end of your quest. You’ve ended up like every girl from any story. Needing to be rescued.”

Freeze that moment.

Imagine it: Charlie the rat, spinning in the air within a pewter cup, bouncing down the stairs. Observed by a bemused cat from above, who had given the swat that sent the cup tumbling.

Fort, Ann, and Salay reaching the tower with me hoisted high overhead.

Tress. Bound by glowing bonds. Held to the wall.

Confident.

“Those stories always leave something out,” Tress said. “It’s really not a problem that someone needs to be saved. Everyone needs help. It’s hard to be the person who makes trouble, but the thing is, *everyone* makes trouble. How would we help anyone if nobody ever

needed help?"

"And you?" the Sorceress asked, starting to draw runes in the air. "You're going to have quite the curse, I'll tell you. I've been saving this one for a *special* occasion. You will spend the next several decades in misery, child."

Down below, a tiny voice echoed up from the hallway. "Magic door, please open!"

"The part the stories leave out," Tress said as the Sorceress's runes formed into a vibrant wall, "is everything that comes before. You see, I've discovered that it's all right to need help. So long as you've lived your life as the kind of person who deserves to be rescued."

The Sorceress released her curse, a blast of light and energy meant to enwrap Tress and transform her. Instead, the runes exploded in a blinding shower of light. Filling the room with white energy that momentarily blotted out all possible sensation.

When it faded, I stood between Tress and the Sorceress—with the key officers of the *Crow's Song* behind me and a little rat on my shoulder—my hands pressed forward, having created an Invested shield of light to shelter Tress. It was constructed of Aons. Which I could now draw. The mechanics might bore you. The results, though, were spectacular.

I was wearing a floral buttoned shirt, shorts that were way too short, and sandals.

With socks.

"Hello, Riina," I said. "I hope your last few years have been *exactly* as lovely as *you* are."

She lowered her hands, her jaw dropping.

"Why, yes," I said, gesturing to my current clothing, "I *do* know this outfit is awful. I realize one should never bring up politics at dinner with one's in-laws. And I know that you, my dear, are living proof that someone doesn't need to be the least bit funny to be an *utter clown*."

A deep glow pulsed beneath my skin. *Finally*.

Turns out that to get this particular set of powers to work, you couldn't simply fake Connection. You needed an invitation and adoption into a very select group. My only chance had been to find one smart enough to be a member of that group, stupid enough for me to toy with, and sadistic enough to trade membership for the opportunity to see me cursed.

"Damn you," she muttered.

My curse was broken. My senses restored. She could see it as easily as I could.

I'd won.

"Excellent work, cabin boy," Tress said, still attached to the wall. "We're going to have to promote you after this."

"Wait…we won?" Salay asked. "Hoid, you're…um… What are you?"

"The term 'sorcerer' will do," I told her. "I have won our bet."

"Wait," Charlie said from his shoulder. "It was really a bet? You let her curse you for a simple *bet*?"

"Please," I said. "Was *anything* about what we just did simple?"

The Sorceress waved her hand, dropping Tress from the wall. "Go," she said. "Before I change my mind."

Fort helped Tress as she stumbled, and she nodded in thanks. Then she turned to the Sorceress. "First," she said, "end Charlie's curse."

"I can't," the Sorceress said. "I can't break a curse unless the terms are met. It's impossible."

Tress looked to me. There were ways, but the Sorceress probably wasn't capable of them. So I nodded. It was true enough.

Tress took a deep breath, then looked back at the Sorceress, her face becoming like steel. "We're not leaving," Tress said. "*You are.*"

"Excuse me?" the Sorceress snapped.

"You've cursed people who only wanted to talk to you," Tress said. "You've taken prisoners, robbed merchants, and destroyed fleets. You are a scourge upon this sea. This planet." She drew

herself up, partially to intimidate the side of her that was shocked by her own audacity. “I demand that you leave this world. Go away, and never return.”

“Oh please,” the Sorceress said. “Who are *you* to make demands of *me*?”

In response, Salay and Fort pulled pistols on her. Ann somehow got out three at once. Charlie growled. It wasn’t very intimidating, but it made him feel good to contribute.

Tress didn’t bother with a gun. She nudged me. “Cabin boy,” she said, “zap her or something.”

“You’re giving *me* orders?” I said softly.

“You’re on my crew, aren’t you?” she said. At least she had the good graces to blush about it.

I sighed and, as ordered, stepped forward and raised my hands. I met the Sorceress’s eyes, and knew what she was thinking. She, like most of her kind, was very good at something we call risk/reward projections. She’d come to this planet because nothing here could threaten her. Then she’d found a dragon living here. Then I’d arrived.

She might have been able to beat me. Curse me again. But she might *not* have been able to. Even if the odds were only one in five that she’d lose, you didn’t live long by frequently taking one-in-five chances that you’ll die. And Riina had lived a very, *very* long time.

A short time later, we all stood on the deck of the *Crow’s Song*, looking up at a twinkling speck of light as it vanished in the sky. The tower was gone, taking the Sorceress with it.

I have that effect on people. Stay around too long, and you'll inevitably envy those who have never met me.

Behind us, the Dougs started to whoop and cheer. Fort rolled out something wonderful to drink, which he'd been saving for such an occasion. Ann decided their cannons needed names, much to

Laggart's lamentation. Salay put her hand to her pocket—and the letter from her father—and suffered it all for now. She even let herself enjoy the celebration.

Tress stepped up to me, holding Charlie. Who was still a rat. "Is there…nothing you can do?" she asked. "No way to break the curse?" Both of them looked to me with hope in their eyes.

"I can't undo the curse," I said. "Not at my current skill with the arts. No one can."

"Oh," Charlie said.

"But perhaps," I said, inspecting the runes I could make out surrounding him, "I *can* change the parameters a little…"

EPILOGUE

Five months later, a ship arrived at the Rock that was not a rock. That ship bumped the docks as it slowed, on account of its new apprentice helmsman being inexperienced. Salay's father looked chagrined, but Salay merely smiled and gave him a few pointers.

The ship was not the *Crow's Song*. The crew had decided that a fresh start would help them in their new lives, and besides, the captain had wanted a few extra cabins. So after receiving their pardons, they'd sold the old ship and bought a new one. With a brand-new name.

The captain soon emerged onto the deck of the *Two Cups* sporting a long captain's jacket and a hat with a plume. She made a few hand signs toward the helm—some of the ones Fort had been teaching the crew. Turns out, it's handy for multiple reasons to be able to communicate with signs on a ship: you can talk to sailors on the rigging or give a direction to the helm without needing to yell over the sounds of the spores or wind. In this case, she congratulated the apprentice helmsman on his first steer into port. Bumps notwithstanding.

After that, Tress walked to the rail and took a sip from her cup. One with a butterfly, which had obviously been glued back together after being shattered into many pieces. The captain didn't mind the breaks. Cups with chips, or dings, or even cracks had stories. She

particularly liked the one this cup told.

The dockmaster and dock inspector arrived, and Salay soon presented them with *quite* the royal writ detailing the important nature of this vessel. Single-handedly stopping the Sorceress had earned Tress and the crew a tad more than a pardon. Plus there was the matter of their exclusive ability to trade through the Crimson and Midnight Seas, opening new opportunities with once-distant seas. Every person on that ship would, within a few years, become fantastically wealthy. (I knew them when they were all just Dougs.)

The king had of course insisted that he'd always intended for this to happen—that he'd believed in Charlie, and his chosen bride, from the beginning. If that sounds like hypocrisy to you, well, we prefer to call it politics.

While the dockmaster and inspector were rereading the writ, Charlie finally emerged on deck.

Fully human again.

The curse had said he needed to bring the person he loved most to the Sorceress's home, to be cursed, in exchange for his freedom. My modifications allowed him instead to bring the person he loved to *her* home, to be versed, in exchange for his freedom. A good, sensible, *non-slant* rhyme.

Tress had left their cabin at his request so he could transform in private. Now he strode out, holding the poem he'd written for her, a stupid grin on his face.

She loved that one.

Also, the only thing he was wearing was a tiny pirate hat. As he stepped up beside her, she leaned in. "Love," she whispered, "clothing. Humans wear *clothing*."

He looked down. "That is going to take getting used to," he said. "Um…excuse me."

Yes, they stayed together. The two of them had both been changed by their journeys—but in complementary ways. Tress remained captain and expert sprouter, while Charlie turned out to be an extremely capable valet and a passable ship's storyteller and musician, a well-versed man indeed.

With a few tips, he wasn't so boring after all. Secretly, I'll tell you that you aren't either. Anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to lower your value. Don't trust them. They know they can't afford you otherwise.

The crew began to climb from the ship, excited for some shore

leave, even if it *was* on the Rock. They all made an appearance, except for Laggart, who was currently in the brig for starting a bar fight at the last port.

You'll be happy to know that, as I've kept track of the crew over the years, even he has shown some growth. It's beginning to look like instead of following his family's tradition of being an unpleasant snarl of misery until you get yourself killed, he's on track to do…well, basically anything else.

As Charlie was getting dressed, Tress read his poem, the verse that broke the curse.

It is only for her. I'm sorry.

Once she looked up, she spotted something exhilarating. Her parents were stumbling down toward the docks, her little brother in tow. Tress's mother had spent most nights since she'd left watching the sea for any signs, but even with the eventual letters Tress had been able to send, she hadn't quite believed Tress would return. Neither of them had, until they saw her standing there.

Tress strode down onto the dock, then onto the once-familiar stone ground—salty and black. Odd, how foreign the place felt. How could something feel both familiar *and* foreign? As her family arrived to embrace her though, she discovered that was exquisitely familiar. Not foreign in the least.

They'd brought their luggage. And their cabin was ready. She ushered them toward the ship, but was interrupted as the duke arrived at last. Red faced. Bearing his scowl. He had only one, Tress had decided. For while you needed a smile for every occasion, a scowl needed no variety.

"What is this?" he said, slapping the writ in his hand. "What have you done?"

"I've rescued your son. The real one. Not the walking chin with a six-word vocabulary."

"I meant what have you done to the island!" the duke said, gesturing at the king's words. "Anyone can leave if they want? The island will soon be completely depopulated."

"Read the next part," she said, and took a sip of her tea, then walked off, not waiting for him.

He had to read it several times to put it together. The king had proclaimed that a generous stipend would be paid to anyone who lived and worked on the Rock for twenty years. If you're so lucky as to get a job on Diggen's Point, you'll retire with a sizable nest egg.

But be warned, positions there are hard to come by these days. No one wants to leave. The beer is great, the company passable, and the pay…well, it makes up for the rest.

Tress stepped back onto the deck of her ship, meeting a newly beclothed Charlie. She nodded down toward his father on the dock. "Want to say hello?"

"No thank you," Charlie said. "Did you leave Mother's letter?" (The duchess, it should be noted, had moved away from the island—and more importantly from her husband—several months before. Turns out that abandoning your only son to certain doom is not a path to a healthy marriage.)

"It's in the stack," Tress said. "He'll find it, assuming he bothers to keep reading. Ah, look. He's scowling again."

"Life is easier for him that way," Charlie said. "He only has to maintain one expression." He wrapped his arms around her and put his head on her shoulder. "It's going to be annoying to no longer have fur, but the other perks are certainly going to outweigh that loss."

"I wonder," she said idly, resting her hand on his as he held her, "if there's a maritime law against a captain dating her valet. What will people say?"

"They will say," he replied softly, "what a lucky, lucky man he is."

They didn't stay long. Just enough time to gather some supplies and for Tress to give another thanks to those who had helped her escape all those months ago.

And then the ship left to sail the ocean with a girl and a rat on board.

The rat, it turns out, was not actually a rat. In more ways than one.

The girl, you may have discovered, was not actually a girl. She was seven ways a woman, regardless of her age.

The ocean, however, was now as you hopefully imagine it. Assuming you imagine it as emerald green, made up of spores, and bearing endless possibilities.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

I'm certain this Kickstarter campaign will become a defining moment of my career. So it's strange to think of how humble its beginnings were.

As is usual for me, the book was born out of a mashup of a couple of ideas. Stories grow out of the friction points between thoughts, like mountains being pushed up by tectonic movement. The first idea for this one is probably obvious: I wanted to do a full-length story told in Hoid's voice.

Someday I'm going to write Hoid's backstory, and I wanted to get fluent and practiced at writing from his viewpoint. I don't think this voice (the way he tells a story like this) will be where I land for his own story—that will need to be more raw, less whimsical. However, I wanted to start with a book that felt like one he'd tell—a full-length version of something like "Wandersail" or "The Dog and the Dragon."

So, I knew this book would have one foot in a whimsical space. I didn't want a fairy tale, but I wanted something adjacent. However, I also didn't want it to be too childlike. I wanted something my fans would enjoy: a grown-up fairy tale, so to speak. And so, my mind went to William Goldman's incredible book *The Princess Bride*. It's the closest thing I know of to the tone I was trying for. (Though *Good Omens* by the late Sir Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman is another really good comparison book for what I wanted to accomplish.)

I showed the film of *The Princess Bride* to my family during the COVID-19 lockdown. I didn't know at the time that I'd end up writing this book; I wasn't really even thinking about doing so. I was just tinkering in the back of my head with ideas—as I often do. Usually they take years or decades to mature.

The film holds up wonderfully, of course, though one thing has always bothered me. The princess who the book and film are both

named after just...doesn't get to do much. My wife, Emily, noticed the same thing, and mentioned after the film something along the lines of, "What would that story have been like if Buttercup had gone searching for Westley, instead of immediately giving him up for dead?"

And that was my seed. The idea that started worming about and growing like verdant aether in my brain.

Oh, I should mention the aethers. For years, I'd been thinking of a world where people sailed on oceans of something that wasn't water. (Non-liquid oceans are something my brain keeps going to.) I started with people just skidding across the surface, pulled by kites. That wasn't working, but then I remembered the process of fluidization, where sand becomes like a liquid when air is pushed through it from below. This landed me on my oceans.

But for a worldbuilding element like this, I want it to be more relevant than just a substance swap. If there are oceans of spores, but they behave exactly like water, then what's the point? It's a cool visual—and that is sometimes enough. But I wanted something that really affected the story.

So, I reached back to an idea I'd had some twenty-five years ago—a group of primal elements known as aethers. I'd hinted at their existence in the Cosmere; mentions or Easter eggs about them show up in other Cosmere novels. This felt like the right time to introduce them, and their explosive potential. There will be more talk of aethers in the future, as this isn't the primary planet they originate upon.

The idea of spores that react to water in dangerous ways making up these oceans gave me just the hook I needed for the setting. And thus I had three pieces. A magic system, evoking an entire setting. A tone, as a story told by Hoid. And a plot: a quest to save a loved one who had vanished at sea.

But what about the character? Well, in this case I did what I often do. I started writing. And I explored who this young woman would be. I like to discover characters, and build the story around their choices.

I probably shouldn't have done what I did, which was start writing this book in secret. Telling nobody, even saving the files in a hidden place on the cloud where my team couldn't see them. But I wanted something that was just for me and for my wife. Something I could share with her, and not worry about deadlines or

expectations. I just wanted to write, free of business constraints or fan expectations. To see where the story took me, and build something like I did long ago, in the days before I had quite so many constraints.

I kept it hidden for almost two years, shared only with Emily. But now I have given it to you as well. I hope that you enjoyed the journey, and will join me for the next three of these projects—which are each unique in their own way.

Brandon Sanderson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lives in Utah with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. In addition to completing Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time, he is the author of such bestsellers as the Mistborn saga, *Warbreaker*, the Stormlight Archive series beginning with *The Way of Kings*, *The Rithmatist*, the Skyward series, the Reckoners series beginning with *Steelheart*, and the Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians series. He won the Hugo Award for *The Emperor's Soul*, a novella set in the world of his acclaimed first novel, *Elantris*.

For behind-the-scenes information on all his books, visit brandonsanderson.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

HOWARD LYON grew up in Arizona, where he met and married his wife, Shari. They have three wonderful kids together: Isaac, Isabel, and Alex. Howard defines his artistic journey as a pursuit of that which is beautiful in all things. You can find his work at howardlyon.com.

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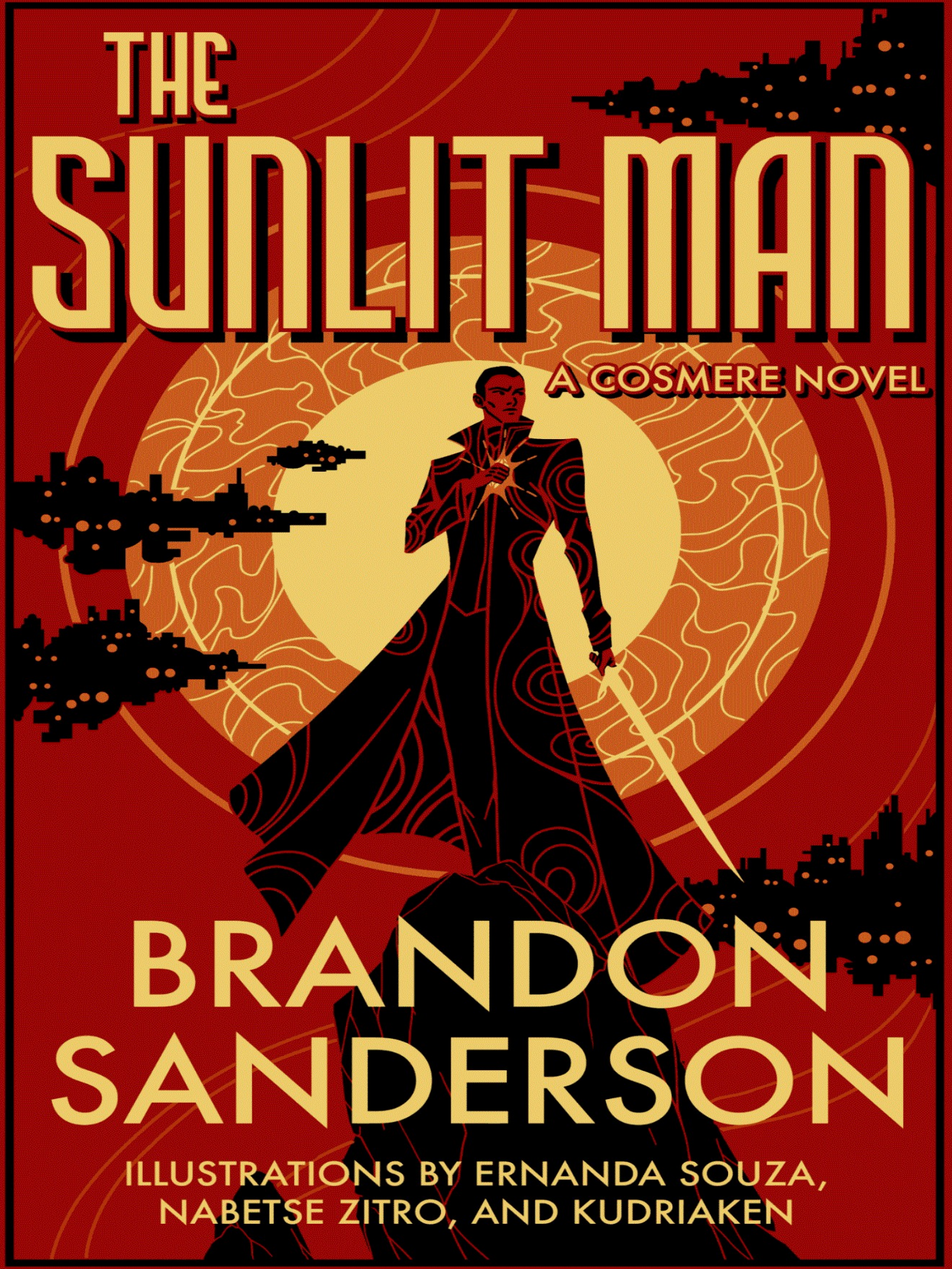
THE SUNLIT MAN

A COSMERE NOVEL



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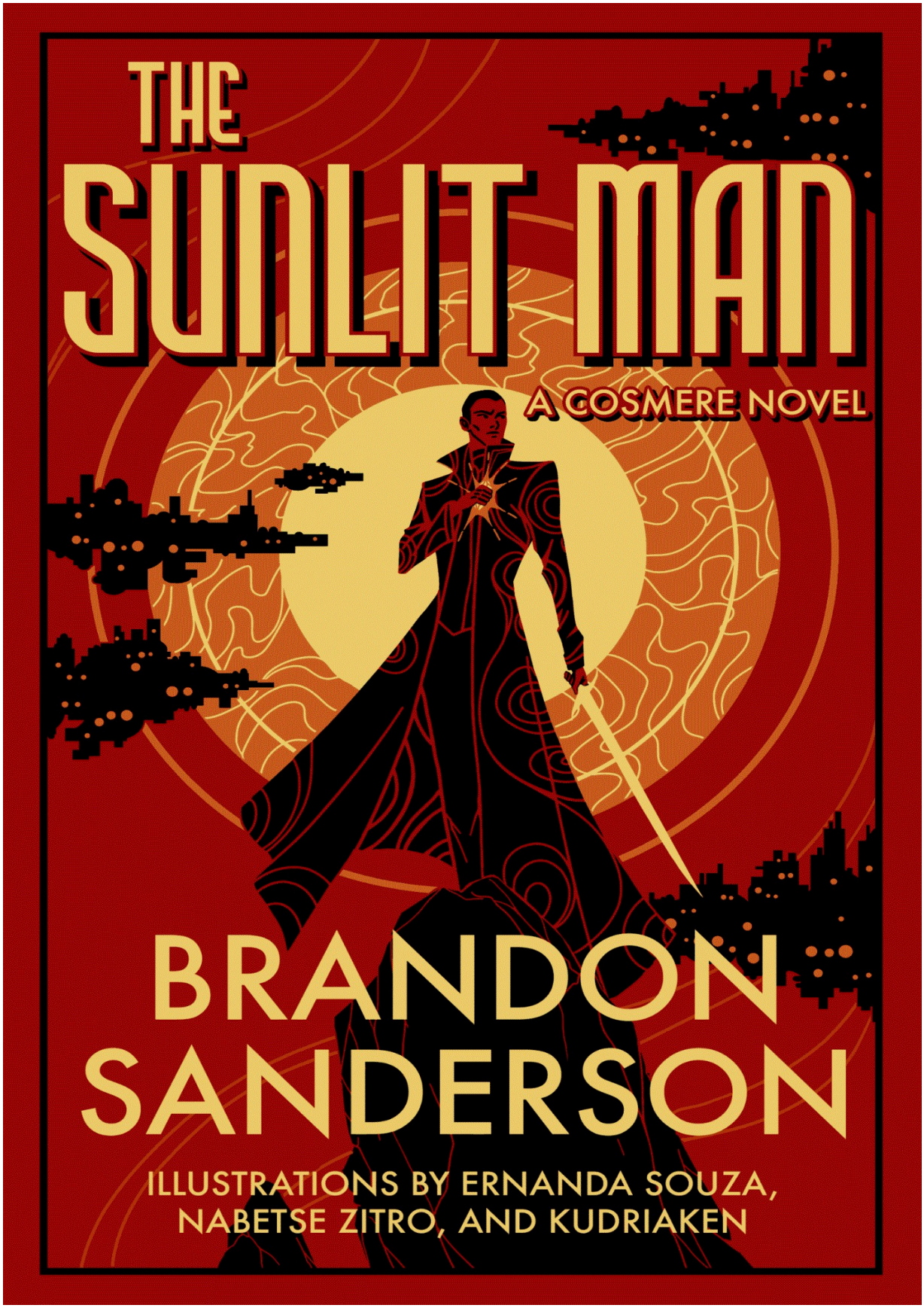
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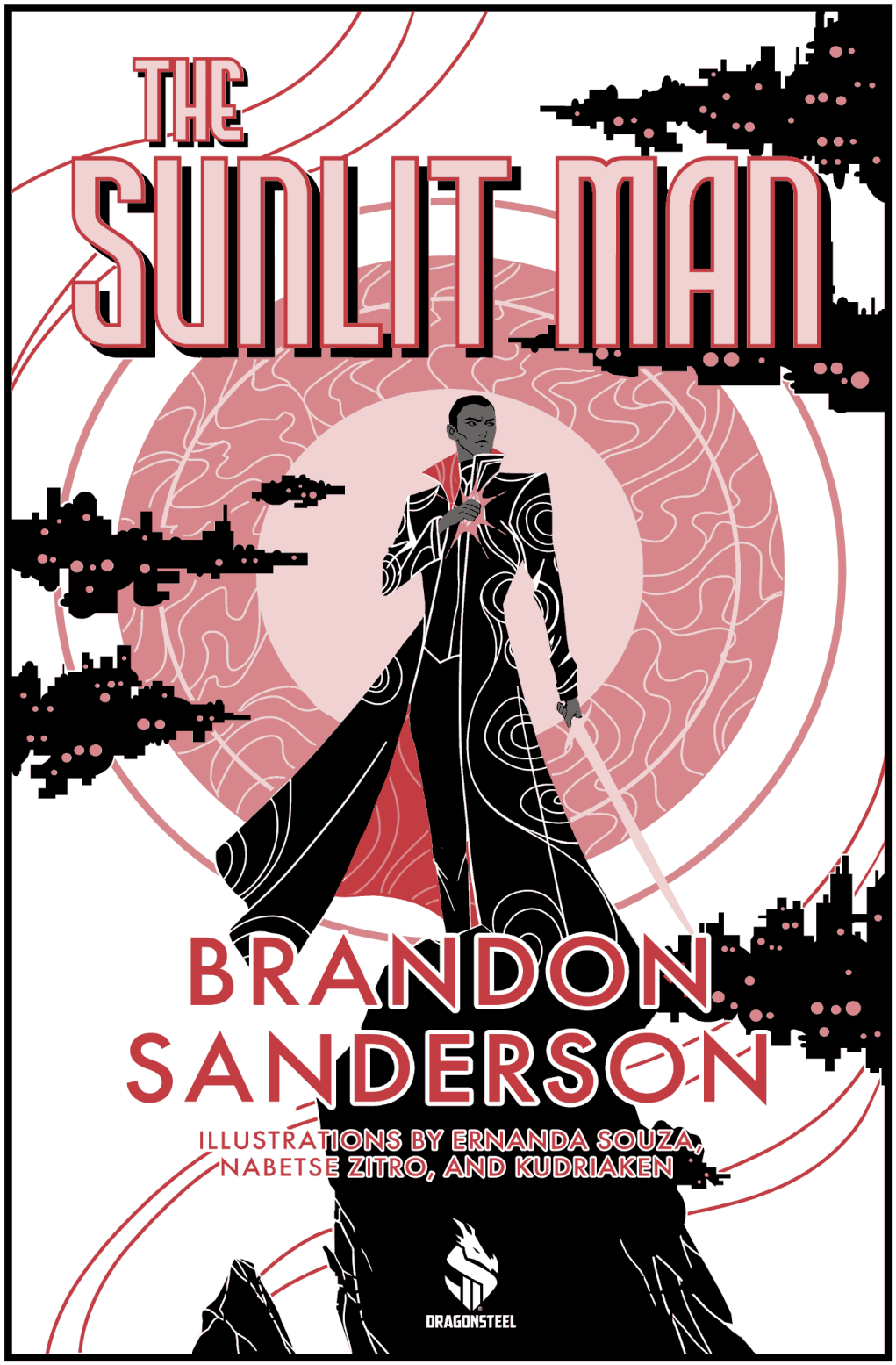
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THE SUNLIT MAN

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FOR ALL OF YOU, THE FANS OF THE COSMERE,

Who make my dreams come to life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEW! WHAT A YEAR! This was quite the wild ride, involving a *ton* of work from everyone involved. I'll make sure to get to them all in this section, but I just wanted to say a big thank-you to everyone. It was a herculean effort to get these books edited, illustrated, and delivered.

Our editor on this book was Moshe Feder, my longtime partner in crime and the man who discovered me. We were thrilled to work with him again, and I'm glad he was here to help me with this next step of Nomad's journey. A special thank-you goes to Dr. Joseph Jensen for his help with the astrophysics, as this one is a bit of a doozy as far as that is concerned. Also, the Cosmere Arcanist team—you guys are great.

I'm represented by the remarkable team at the JABberwocky Literary Agency, with Joshua Bilmes at the helm. Thanks also to Susan Velazquez and Christina Zobel.

This book is odd compared to the other secret projects, as we have three illustrators, not one. We wanted to try out some new people and found some

individuals who worked well for this specific novel. Thank you to all of them for their amazing work. These projects became extra special because of their involvement. Ernanda Souza did the endpapers, full-color illustrations, and concept art. She really did a great job and was awesome to work with. Nabetse Zitro did our interior drawings, joining us again after the incredible work he did on the new comic pages in the *White Sand* graphic novel omnibus. And kudriaken did our spectacular cover illustration.

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From here, let's go to the departments at Dragonsteel. I have the best team in the business, and they all put a lot of work into these secret projects.

Isaac StÙart is our vice president of Creative Development. His team includes Ben McSweeney (who did great concept work to keep the vision of the project cohesive), Rachael Lynn Buchanan (who did a lot of heavy lifting helping Isaac work with the artists, choosing scenes to illustrate, and keeping track of details), Jennifer Neal, Hayley Lazo, Priscilla Spencer, and Anna Earley.

The Instructional Peter Ahlstrom is our vice president of Editorial. His team includes Karen Ahlstrom, Kristy S. Gilbert, Jennie Stevens (our in-house editor of this book), Betsey Ahlstrom, and Emily Shaw-Higham. Kristy Kugler did the copyedit.

The Narrative department is just Dan Wells, who is also its VP. But we let him boss Ben around to make up for it.

Our COO is Emily Sanderson, and the Operations team includes Matt "Matt" Hatch, Emma Tan-Stoker, Jane Horne, Kathleen Dorsey Sanderson, Makena Saluone, Hazel Cummings, and Becky Wilson.

Adam Horne, a.k.a. the Grand Master of Corgis, is our vice president of Publicity and Marketing. His team includes Jeremy Palmer, Taylor D. Hatch, and Octavia Escamilla.

Kara Stewart is our vice president of Merchandising, Events, and making sure you all get your boxes of stuff. Her team includes Emma Tan-Stoker, Christi Jacobsen, Kellyn Neumann, Lex Willhite, Mem Grange, Michael Bateman, Joy Allen, Ally Reep, Richard Rubert, Katy Ives, Brett Moore, Dallin Holden, Daniel Phipps, Jacob Chrisman, Alex Lyon, Matt Hampton, Camilla Cutler, Quinton Martin, Esther Grange, Logan Reep, Laura

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Alpha readers for this book include Karen Ahlstrom, Joy Allen, Christi Jacobsen, Brett Moore, Brad Neumann, Kellyn Neumann, Ally Reep, Emma Tan-Stoker, Sean VanBlack, and Dan Wells.

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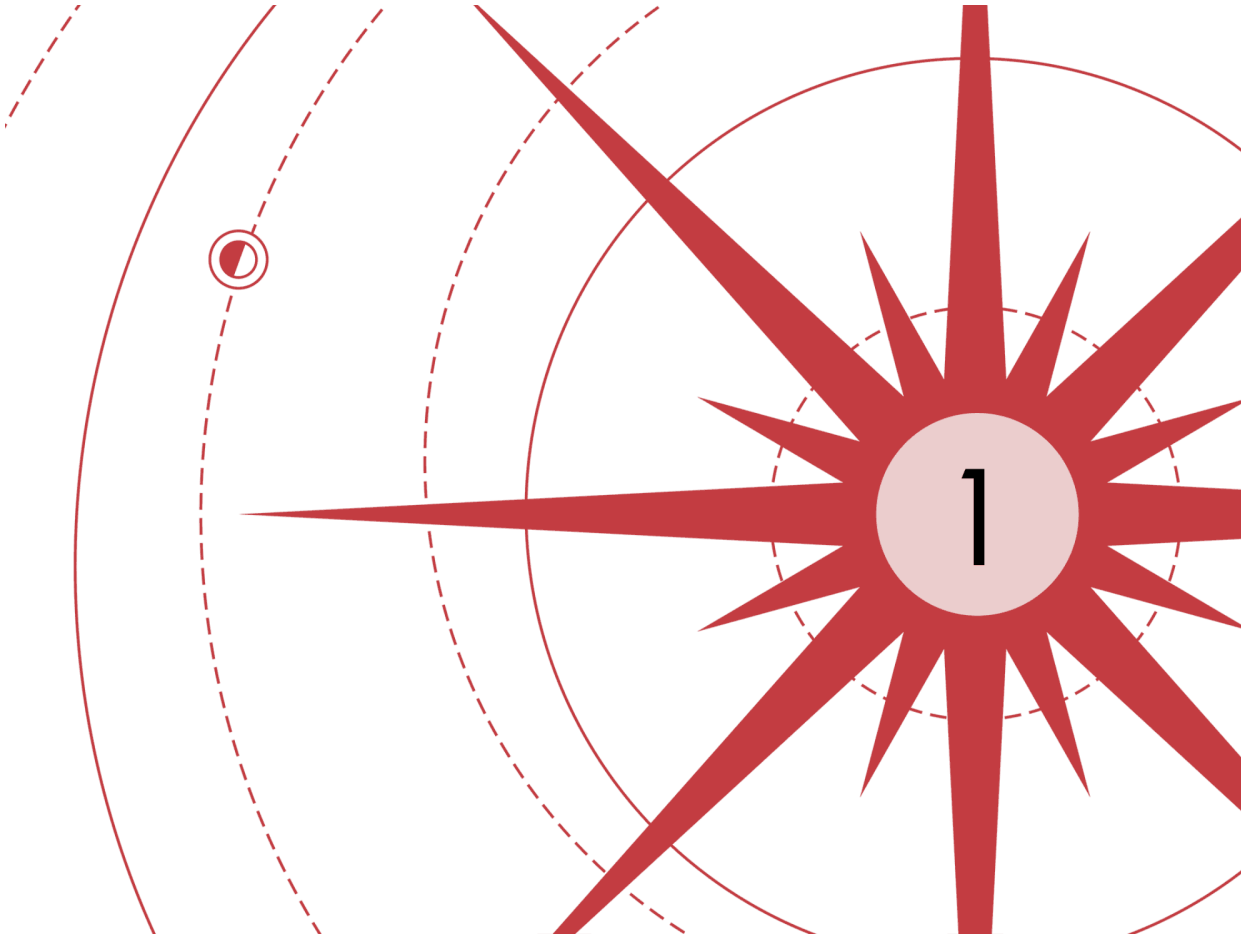
Our gamma readers include many beta readers, along with Evgeni "Argent" Kirilov, Joshua Harkey, Ross Newberry, Tim Challener, Jessica Ashcraft, Ted Herman, Brian T. Hill, Rob West, Paige Vest, Gary Singer, Darci Cole, Kalyani Poluri, Jayden King, Lingting "Botanica" Xu, Glen Vogelaar, Bob Kluttz, Billy Todd, Megan Kanne, Eliyahu Berelowitz Levin, Aaron Ford, Jessie Lake, and Sam Baskin.

The Arcanist team includes Eric Lake, Evgeni "Argent" Kirilov, Ben Marrow, David Behrens, Ian McNatt, and Joshua Harkey.

As this is the last book of the Secret Projects Kickstarter, I wanted to take one final opportunity to thank you all. I might have written the books, but you created the *event* that they became. You made this year so very special. After you've read the book, see the postscript for more.

Brandon Sanderson



NOMAD WOKE UP among the condemned.

He blinked, his right cheek in the dirt. Then he focused on the incongruous sight of a plant growing in fast-motion before his eyes. Was he dreaming? The fragile sprout quivered and twisted, heaving up from the earth. It seemed to stretch with joy, its seedpods parting like arms after a deep sleep. A stalk emerged from the center, testing the air like a serpent's tongue. Then it stretched left toward the dim light shining from that direction.

Nomad groaned and lifted his head, mind fuzzy, muscles sore. Where had he Skipped to this time? And would it be far enough away to hide from the Night Brigade?

Of course it wouldn't be. No place could hide him from them. He had to keep moving. Had to…

Storms. It felt good to lie here. Couldn't he just rest for a while? Stop running for once?

Rough hands grabbed him from behind and hauled him to his knees, jolting him from his stupor. He became more aware of his surroundings: the shouting, the groaning. Sounds he'd been oblivious to in his post-Skip grogginess.

The people here, including the man who grabbed him, wore unfamiliar clothing. Long trousers, sleeves with tight cuffs, shirts with high collars all the way up to the chin. The man shook him, barking at Nomad in a language he didn't understand.

"Trans…translation?" Nomad croaked.

Sorry, a deep, monotone voice said in his head. *We don't have enough Investiture for that.*

Right. He'd barely reached the threshold for his last Skip, which would leave him nearly drained. His abilities relied on reaching or maintaining certain thresholds of Investiture, the mystical power source that fueled extraordinary events on most planets he visited.

"How much?" he croaked. "How much do we have left?"

Around fifteen hundred BEUs. So, in other words, under eight percent Skip capacity.

Damnation. As he'd worried, the cost to come here had left him destitute. As long as he maintained certain levels, his body could do exceptional things. Each cost a tiny bit of Investiture, but that cost was minimal—so long as he kept his thresholds.

Once he had over two thousand Breath Equivalent Units, he could play with his Connection. Then he could Connect to the planet using his skills and speak the local language. Which meant Nomad wouldn't be able to speak to the locals until he found a power source to absorb.

He winced at the breath of the shouting man. He wore a hat with a wide brim, tied under the chin, and thick gloves. It was dim out, though a burning corona lit the horizon. Just before dawn, Nomad guessed. And even by that light, sprouts were growing all across this field. Those plants…their movements reminded him of home—a place without soil, but with plants that were so much more vigorous than on other worlds.

These weren't the same, though. They didn't dodge to avoid being stepped on. These plants were merely growing quickly. Why?

Nearby, people wearing long white coats pounded stakes into the ground—then others chained down people who didn't have those coats. Both groups had a variety of skin tones and wore similar clothing.

Nomad couldn't understand the words anyone was shouting, but he recognized the bearing of the condemned. The cries of despair from some, the pleading tones of others, the abject resignation in most as they were chained to the ground.

This was an execution.

The man holding Nomad shouted at him again, glaring through eyes a watery blue. Nomad just shook his head. That breath could have wilted flowers. The man's companion—dressed in one of those long white coats—gestured to Nomad, arguing. Soon his two captors made a decision. One grabbed a set of manacles off his belt, moving to cuff Nomad.

"Yeah," Nomad said, "I don't think so." He grabbed the man's wrist, preparing to throw him and trip the other man.

But Nomad's muscles locked up—like a machine that had run out of oil. He stiffened in place, and the men pulled away from him, surprised by his sudden outburst.

Nomad's muscles unlocked, and he stretched his arms, feeling a sudden, sharp pain. "Damnation!" His Torment was getting worse. He glanced at his frightened captors. At least they didn't seem to be armed.

A figure emerged from the crowd. Everyone else was swathed in clothing—male or female, they showed skin only on their faces. But this newcomer was bare chested—wearing a diaphanous robe split at the front—and had on thick black trousers. He was the sole person on the field not wearing gloves, though he did wear a pair of golden bracers on his forearms.

He was also missing most of his chest.

Much of the pectorals, rib cage, and heart had been *dug out*—burned away, leaving the remaining skin seared and blackened. Inside the cavity, the man's heart had been replaced by a glimmering ember. It pulsed red when wind stoked it—as did similar pinpricks of crimson light among the char. Black burn marks radiated from the hole across the man's skin, extending as far as a few specks on his face, which occasionally glittered with their own much smaller sparks. It was like the man had been strapped to a jet engine as it ignited—somehow leaving him not only alive, but perpetually *burning*.

"Don't suppose," Nomad said, "you fellows are the type who enjoy a comical blunder made by a newcomer to your culture?" He stood and raised his hands in a nonthreatening way, ignoring the instincts that told him—as always—that he needed to *run*.

The ember man pulled a large bat off his back. Like a police baton, but more begrudging in its nonlethality.

“Didn’t think so,” Nomad said, backing up. A few of the chained people watched him with the strange, yet familiar, hope of a prisoner—happy that someone *else* was drawing attention.

The ember man came for him, supernaturally quick, his heart light flaring. He was Invested. Wonderful.

Nomad barely dodged a mighty blow.

“I need a weapon, Aux!” Nomad snapped.

Well, summon one then, my dear squire, said the voice in his head. *I’m not holding you back.*

Nomad grunted, diving through a tall patch of grass that had sprung up in the minutes since he’d woken. He tried to make a weapon appear, but nothing happened.

It’s your Torment, the knight helpfully observes to his moderately capable squire. It has grown strong enough to deny you weapons. As usual, Aux’s voice was completely monotone. He was self-conscious about that, hence the added commentary.

Nomad dodged again as the ember man slammed his baton down in another near miss—making the ground tremble at the impact. Storms. That light was getting brighter. Covering the entire horizon in a way that felt too even. How…how large *was* the sun on this planet?

“I thought,” Nomad shouted, “that my oaths overrode that aspect of the Torment!”

I’m sorry, Nomad. But what *oaths?*

The ember man prepared another swing, and Nomad took a deep breath, then ducked the attack and bodychecked the man. As soon as he went in for the hit, though, his body locked up again.

Yes, I see, the knight muses with a conversational tone. Your Torment now attempts to prevent even minor physical altercations.

He couldn't so much as *tackle* someone? It *was* getting bad. The ember man hit Nomad across the face, throwing him to the ground. Nomad managed to roll and avoid the baton and, with a groan, heaved himself to his feet.

The baton came in again, and by instinct, Nomad put up both hands—catching it. Stopping the swing cold.

The ember man's eyes widened. Nearby, several of the prisoners called out. Heads turned. Seemed like people around here weren't accustomed to the sight of a person going toe-to-toe with one of these Invested warriors. The ember man's eyes widened further as—with teeth gritted—Nomad stepped forward and shoved him off balance, sending him stumbling backward.

Behind the strange warrior, blazing light warped the molten horizon, bringing with it a sudden, blasting heat. Around them, the plants that had grown so rapidly began wilting. The lines of chained people whimpered and screamed.

Run, a part of Nomad shouted. *Run!*

It's what he did.

It was all he knew these days.

But as he turned to dash away, *another* ember man behind him prepared to swing. Nomad tried to catch this blow too, but his storming body locked up *again*.

"Oh, come *on*!" he shouted as the baton clobbered him in the side. He stumbled. The ember man decked him across the face with a powerful fist, sending him to the dirt again.

Nomad gasped, groaning, feeling gritty soil and rocks on his skin. And heat. Terrible, bewildering heat from the horizon, still building in intensity.

Both ember men turned away, and the first thumbed over his shoulder at Nomad. The two timid officers in the white coats hastened over and—while Nomad was in a daze of pain and frustration—manacled his hands together. They appeared to contemplate pounding a spike into the earth and pinning him there, but rightly guessed that a man who could catch the bat of an Invested warrior could rip it out. Instead they hauled him over to a ring that had been affixed to a section of stone, locking him there.

Nomad fell to his knees in the line of prisoners, sweat dripping from his brow as the heat increased. His instincts screamed at him to run.

Yet another piece of him…simply wanted to be done. How long had the chase lasted? How long had it been since he'd stood proud?

Maybe I'll just let it end, he thought. *A mercy killing. Like a man mortally wounded on the battlefield.*

He slumped, the soreness in his side pulsing, though he doubted anything was broken. So long as he maintained around five percent Skip capacity—around a thousand BEUs—his body would be more powerful, more endurant. Where others broke, he bruised. Fire that would sear others only singed him.

Healing engaged, the hero says with a confident voice to his humiliated valet. You're under ten percent Skip capacity, so your healing won't be as efficient as you're used to.

At times he wondered if the enhancements he bore were a blessing or another part of the Torment. The light increased with the heat, becoming blinding. That smoke in the distance…was that the *ground* catching fire? From the light of the sun?

Damnation. Damnation *itself* was rising over the horizon.

That light, Aux said. *It's far too powerful for ordinary sunlight—at least on any habitable planet.*

"Think the light is Invested?" Nomad whispered. "Like on Taldain?"

A plausible theory, the knight says with a musing curiosity.

"Think you can absorb it?"

Possibly. We'll likely soon see…

If he could absorb enough, he could Skip right off this planet and put even more space between himself and the Night Brigade. Wouldn't that be nice for once? To have a head start? Still, something about the intensity of that light daunted Nomad. Worried him. He stared at it as the nearby officers—including the ember men—finished locking down the prisoners. Once done, they ran to a line of machines. Long and thin, they had six seats each. Open to the air, with a windshield in front and controls for the front left operator.

They kind of looked like…six-seater hovercycles? An odd construction, but he wasn't sure what else to call them. You apparently straddled each seat—there was an opening for the inner leg—though they were all locked together along a central fuselage with no outer wall or door. Regardless, he wasn't surprised when fires blasted underneath the first of these, raising it in the air a half dozen feet or so.

What did it matter? He turned toward the ever-increasing light as the plants—vibrant only minutes ago—browned and withered. He thought he

could hear the roar of flames in the distance as the full-intensity sunlight advanced, like the front of a once-familiar storm.

He had a guess, watching the strength of that light, that he wouldn't be able to absorb it. No more than a common cord and plug could handle the raw output of a nuclear reactor. This was something incredible, a force that would fry him before he could make use of its power.

Uh, Nomad, Aux said in his monotone voice. *I get the feeling that trying to absorb and use Investiture from* that *is going to be like trying to pick out a snowflake from an avalanche. I…don't think we should let it hit you.*

"It will kill me if it does…" Nomad whispered.

Is that…what you want?

No.

No, even though he hated much about his life, he *didn't* want to die. Even though each day he became something more feral…well, feral things knew to struggle for life.

A sudden frantic desperation struck Nomad. He began pulling and flailing against the chains. The second of the four hovercycles took off, and he knew—from the speed of the advancing sunlight—that they were his only hope of escape. He screamed, voice ragged, straining against the steel, stretching it—but unable to pull it free.

"Aux!" he shouted. "I need a Blade! Transform!"

I'm not the one preventing that, Nomad.

"That light is going to kill us!"

Point: it is going to kill you, my poor valet. I am already dead.

Nomad yelled something primal as the third hovercycle took off, though the last one was having troubles. Perhaps he—

Wait.

"Weapons are forbidden to me. What about tools?"

Why would they *be forbidden to you?*

Nomad was an idiot! Auxiliary was a shapeshifting metal tool that, in this case, he could manifest physically as a crowbar. It formed in his hands as if from white mist, appearing out of nothing. Nomad hooked it into the ring on the boulder, then threw his weight against it.

SNAP.

He lurched free, hands still manacled, but with two feet of slack between them. He stumbled to his feet and dashed toward the last of the hovercycles as the fires finally ignited underneath it.

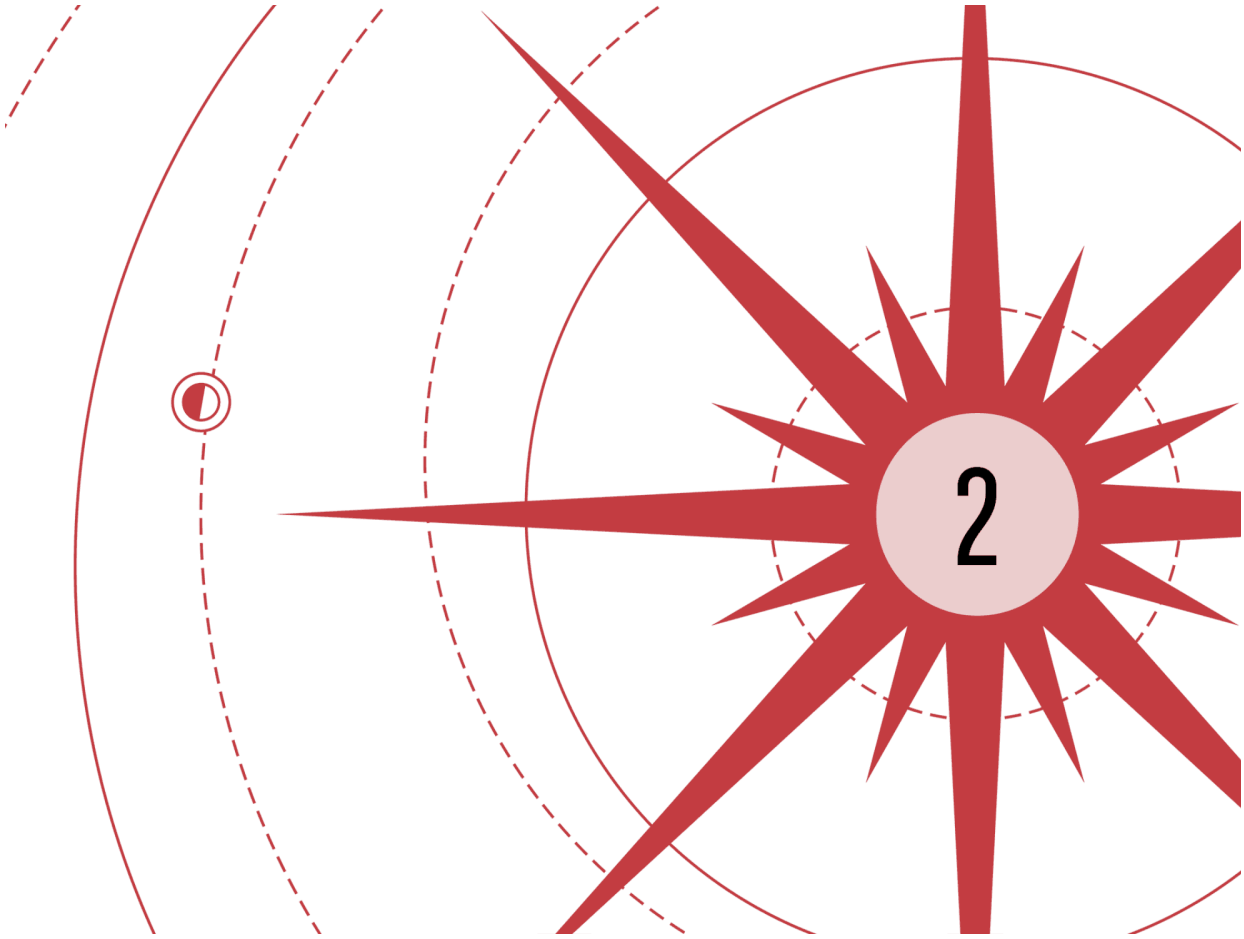
He summoned Auxiliary as a hook and chain, which he immediately hurled at the cycle. It struck just as the machine took off. At Nomad's command, once Auxiliary caught it, the hook fuzzed briefly and sealed as a solid ring around a protrusion on the back of the vehicle. The other end of the chain locked onto Nomad's manacles.

The sunlight reached him. An incredible, intense, burning light. Prisoners burst into flame, screaming.

Oh, storms, the knight shouts.

In that moment, the slack on the chain pulled tight. Nomad was yanked out of the sunlight, his skin screaming in agony, his clothing aflame.

He was dragged away from certain death. But toward what, he had no idea.



NOMAD SLAMMED TO the ground side-first, dragged with frightening speed after the hovercycle.

Your healing is engaged, Aux said. *And your body has adjusted to the local environment's lower air pressure. But, Nomad, you've got so little Investiture left. Try not to get too beat up by this next part, all right?*

Even as Aux said it, Nomad ripped through barriers of withered plants and smashed repeatedly against rocks, dirt grinding into his skin. But again, Nomad was built of strong stuff. A base level of Investiture toughened him. Though healing would use Investiture up faster than other abilities, so long as he kept a minimum baseline, he might not need much healing.

He wasn't immortal. Most advanced weapons would be instantly lethal to him—storms, even many primitive ones could kill him if used persistently, running him out of Investiture. However, where an ordinary man's arms would have been twisted from their sockets—their skin flayed as plant

detritus became like razors in the high speed—he stayed together. And even managed to heal from the burns.

Down to six percent, Aux informed him. *That wasn't too bad, all things considered. But…did you feel that heat? It was unreal. There was Investiture involved for sure, but I couldn't grab any of it. Opening myself up to absorb that would have destroyed me. We will need a safer way to harvest it.*

Nomad grunted as he crashed into the ground again. With effort, he managed to turn himself to put the brunt of the further damage on his thigh and shoulder. Though the wind put out the flames on his clothing, the force of slamming against things ripped the remnants of his jacket and shirt away.

His skin held, though. He didn't mind the rough treatment of his escape. It was better than being left in that sunlight.

He closed his eyes, trying to banish a greater pain. The memory of the unfortunate prisoners' screams when the sunrise hit them, turning them to ash in seconds. He was sure some of them had been calling to him for help.

Once, he'd have been unable to ignore that. But millions, perhaps billions, of people died each day around the cosmere. He couldn't stop that. He could barely keep *himself* alive.

It hurt regardless. Even after years of torment, he still hated watching people die.

He tucked in his chin, protecting his face from the jolting chaos of being hauled across the rough surface of this harsh world. He could see the sky darkening. The fearsome sunlight vanished beneath the horizon as if it were dusk, though Nomad was the one moving. The hovercycle was fast enough to round the planet ahead of the rising sun, staying out of the dawn's burning clutches.

This planet must have a slow rotation, the hero observes to his erratic valet. Note how these vehicles can easily outrun the sun.

Ahead, opposite the sun, an enormous planetary ring rose in the sky—a broad arc that reflected the sunlight.

Nomad had little opportunity to enjoy the return to safe twilight. Several of the people on the cycle tried to pry loose his chain, but at such speeds—and with him as a weight on the end—that would be difficult even if he hadn't sealed the loop. He wondered if perhaps they'd stop to deal with him, but they kept on flying after the other cycles, never more than a few feet off the ground.

Eventually they slowed, then stopped. Nomad came to rest in a patch of wet soil, appreciating the sensation of something soft. He groaned and

flopped over, trousers a mess of rips and tatters, freshly healed skin beaten and battered, hands still manacled. After a moment of agony—spent trying to appreciate the fact that at least no new pains were being added—he turned his head to see why they'd stopped.

He could see no reason. Perhaps it was just for the drivers to get their bearings—because after a short conversation, the hovercycles took off again. This time, they rose higher in the air, leaving Nomad to dangle. This was better, at least, because as they flew, he didn't get slammed into anything. He assumed they stayed low earlier because they hadn't wanted to risk rising too high into the sunlight.

They flew for what felt like an hour until they finally reached something interesting: a floating city. It moved through the landscape, an enormous plate, lifted by the thrust of hundreds of engines burning underneath it. Nomad had been on flying cities before, including one on a planet near his homeworld, but rarely had he seen one so…ramshackle. A motley collection of single-story buildings, like an enormous slum, somehow raised up above the ground—but only thirty or forty feet. Indeed, it seemed like even getting to that modest height was straining the city's engines, their lift barely enough to clear the landscape's obstacles.

This wasn't some soaring metropolis of technological splendor. It was a desperate exercise in survival. He looked back into the distance, where the light on the horizon had faded to invisibility. Yet he knew the sun was there. Looming. Like the date of your execution.

"You have to remain ahead of it, don't you?" he whispered. "You live in the shadows because the sun here will kill you."

Storms. An entire society that had to keep moving, outrunning the sun itself? The implications of it set his mind working, and old training—the man he'd once been—started to worm through the corpse he'd become. Why wasn't the weather on this planet, even in the darkness, a tempest? If the sun was superheating one side all the time, you'd never be able to survive on the other side. That they could was evident, so he was missing something.

How did they feed themselves? What fuel powered those engines, and how did they possibly have time to mine or drill for it while moving? And speaking of mines, why not live in caves? They obviously had metal to spare. They'd used some to chain those poor sods to the ground.

He'd always been inquisitive. Even after he'd become a soldier—pointedly turning away from the life of a scholar—he'd asked questions. Now they teased him until he beat them back with a firm hand. Only one

mattered. Would the power source of those engines be enough to fuel his next Skip and get him off this planet before the Night Brigade found him?

The hovercycle roared, climbing toward the city. He dangled under the last of the four, weighing it down, the engines underneath throwing fire his direction and heating his chain. Auxiliary could handle it, fortunately. Curiously this small rise in elevation made Nomad's ears pop.

Once the cycles reached the surface level of the city, they didn't park in the conventional way. They moved in sideways and locked into the city's edge, their engines remaining on, adding their lift to that of the main engines.

Nomad dangled by his hands and chain, his pains fading as he healed once again, though this healing was minimal compared to what he'd needed to recover from that sunlight. From this vantage, he could see lumps of barren hills and muddy pits below, like sludge and moors. The city had left a wide trail of burned, dried-out dirt behind it. Obviously, with a scar like that to follow, it was easy for those flying cycles to track their way home.

He was surprised how well he could see. He blinked, sweat and muddy water dripping into his eyes, and looked up at that ring again. Like most, it was actually a collection of rings. Brilliant, blue and gold, circling the planet—sweeping high in the air, extending as if into infinity. They pointed toward the sun, tipped at a slight angle, reflecting sunlight down onto the surface. Now that he could study it, a part of him acknowledged how stunning the sight was. He'd visited tens of planets and had never seen anything so stoically magnificent. Mud and fire below, but in the air…that was majesty. This was a planet that wore a crown.

His chain shook as someone began to haul him upward. Soon he was grabbed by his arms and heaved up onto the metal surface of the city, into a crooked street lined with squat buildings. A small crowd chattered and gestured at him. Ignoring them, he focused instead on the five distinctive figures behind them—people with embers in their chests.

They stood with heads bowed, eyes closed—embers having cooled. Two were women, he thought, though the fire that consumed their chests had left no semblance of breasts, only that hole stretching two handspans wide, bits of the ribs poking through the charred skin. Embers in place of hearts.

The rest of the people were dressed as he'd seen below: high collars that reached all the way to the chin, swathed in clothing, each wearing gloves. Several wore the white coats, formal, with open fronts but insignias on the shoulders. Officers or officials. The rest wore muted colors and seemed to be

civilians. Some of the women wore skirts, though many preferred long, skirtlike jackets, their fronts open to reveal trousers underneath. Many—both men and women—wore hats with wide brims. Why did they wear those when there was barely any light?

Don't think about it, he told himself, exhausted. *Who cares? You're not going to be here long enough to learn anything about their culture.*

Many had pale skin, though nearly as many had darker skin like his. A smaller number had a variety of shades between. The crowd soon stilled, then lowered their eyes and backed away, parting to make way for some newcomer. Nomad settled back on his heels, breathing in and out deeply. The newcomer proved to be a tall man in a black coat—with eyes that glowed.

They simmered a deep red color, as if lit from behind. The effect reminded Nomad of something from his past, long ago—but this was less like the red eyes of a corrupted soul, and more like something that was burning inside the man. His black coat glowed too, along the edges, in a similar red-orange shade. Nomad thought he had one of those embers in his chest as well, though that was covered with thin clothing. It didn't seem to have sunk as deeply into the skin as the others, as he still had the shape of his pectorals.

His glow was mimicked by many of the buildings, the rims of walls glowing as if by firelight. Like the city had recently been aflame, and these were its ashes.

The man with the glowing eyes raised a thick gloved hand to quiet the crowd. He took in Nomad, then nodded to two officers and pointed, barking an order. The officers fell over themselves to obey, scrambling to undo Nomad's manacles.

Nervous, they backed away as soon as the manacles were off. Nomad rose to his feet, making many of the civilians gasp, but didn't make any sudden moves. Because, storms, he was tired. He let out a long sigh, pains having become aches. He told Auxiliary to stay in place as a chain; he didn't want them to realize he had access to a shape-changing tool.

The man with the glowing eyes barked something at him, voice harsh.

Nomad shook his head.

Glowing Eyes repeated his question, louder, slower, angrier.

"I don't speak your tongue," Nomad said hoarsely. "Give me a power source, like one from the engines of those cycles. If I absorb that, it might be enough."

That depended on what they were using as fuel—but the way they kept an entire city floating, he doubted their power source was conventional. The idea of fueling a city like this with coal was laughable. They'd be using some kind of Invested material, perhaps charged in that sunlight.

The leader, finally realizing that Nomad wasn't going to respond, raised his hand to the side—then carefully pulled off his glove, one finger at a time. People gasped, though the move revealed only an ordinary, if pale, hand.

The man stepped up to Nomad and seized him by the face.

Nothing happened.

The man seemed surprised by this. He shifted his grip.

"If you lean in for a kiss," Nomad muttered, "I'm going to bite your storming lip off."

It felt good to be able to joke like that. His distant, former master would be proud of him. In his youth, Nomad had been far too serious and rarely allowed himself levity. More because he'd been too embarrassed and frightened by the idea of possibly saying something cringeworthy.

Get dragged through the dirt enough times—get beaten to within an inch of your life, to the point where you barely remembered your own name—well, that did wonders for your sense of humor. All you had left at that point was to laugh at the joke you had become.

The onlookers were *really* amazed by the fact that nothing happened when Glowing Eyes touched him. The man took Nomad one final time by the chin, then let go and wiped his hand on his coat before replacing his glove, his eyes—like the burning light of firemoss—illuminating the front brim of his hat and the too-smooth features of his face. He might have been fifty, but it was hard to tell, as he didn't have a single wrinkle. Seemed there were advantages to living in perpetual twilight.

One of the officers from before stepped up and gestured at Nomad, speaking in hushed tones. He looked incredulous, pointing toward the horizon.

Another of the officers nodded, staring at Nomad. "Sess Nassith Tor," he whispered.

Curious, the knight says. I almost understood that. It's very similar to another language I'm still faintly Connected to.

"Any idea which one?" Nomad growled.

No. But…I think…Sess Nassith Tor… It means something like… One Who Escaped the Sun.

Others behind repeated the phrase, taking it up, until Glowing Eyes roared at them. He looked back at Nomad, then kicked him square in the chest. It hurt, particularly in the state Nomad was in. This man was definitely Invested, to deliver so strong a kick.

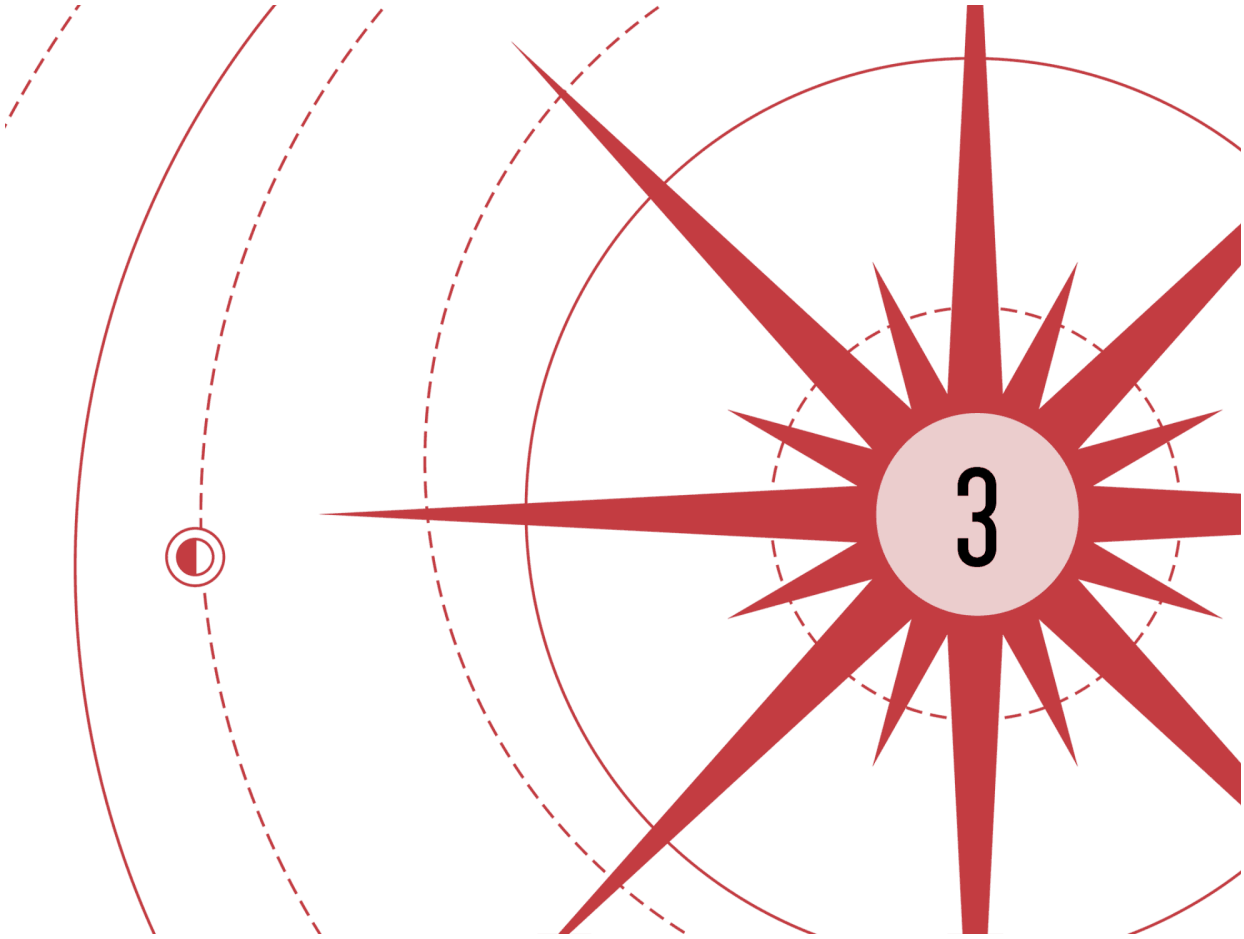
Nomad grunted and bent over, gasping for breath. The man seized him, then smiled, now realizing that Nomad wouldn't fight back. The man *enjoyed* that idea. He tossed Nomad to the side, then kicked him in the chest again, his smile broadening.

Nomad would have loved to rip that smile off with some skin attached. But since fighting back would make him freeze, the best thing to do was to play docile.

Glowing Eyes gestured to Nomad. "*Kor* Sess Nassith Tor," he said with a sneer, then kicked Nomad again for good measure.

A few officers scrambled forward and grabbed him under the arms to drag him off. He found himself hoping for a nice cell—someplace cold and hard, yes, but at least he could sleep and forget who he was for a few hours.

Such modest hopes were shattered as the city started to break apart.



THE ENTIRE CITY vibrated, and the buildings swayed sickeningly. Cracks appeared in the metal street beneath Nomad, but as he began to panic, his captors calmly stepped across the cracks and pulled him into a building.

The city shook and split. It…it wasn't breaking. It was *disassembling*. It shattered into hundreds of pieces, each chunk rising on its own jets, each with a single building on it. Each chunk was a *ship*.

Earlier, he'd seen how the hovercycles had locked into place along the edge, adding their thrust to the city. In a discomfiting moment, he now realized that *every* piece of the platform was similar. It wasn't one big flying city; instead it had been hundreds of ships joined together.

Most of them were modest in size—the single-family-home version of a hovership. Many were smaller than that, built like tugboats, with wide decks and a cab on top. A few were larger, carrying wide buildings suitable for meeting halls or warehouses. They were all bounded with wide, flat decks that could be joined together to make the streets. As each ship flew off,

railings rose at the decks' edges and walls unfolded to reveal windshields and control cabs.

He got the impression that this city hadn't been built as a cohesive whole that could also be disassembled—rather, this was a hodgepodge of individual vehicles that could work together. That helped explain the city's eclectic quality. The place was like a caravan that, for the sake of convenience or defense, could assemble its pieces into a temporary town.

The fact that it worked so well together was remarkable. Responding to shouts and instructions Nomad couldn't understand, many of the ships flew off into the distance, engaged in some activity. Nomad squinted and saw that several were scattering some substance onto the ground.

Seeds, he realized. *They're spreading seeds.* A puzzle piece of this bizarre world fell into place. The Invested sunlight explained the fast-growing plants, maturing almost instantly as they absorbed the potent predawn light. He'd already proven he couldn't siphon off that energy for himself, but the plants whispered there was a way—even if it was out of his reach.

Regardless, this society had a harvest *every day*. They must sow crops, then reap them mere hours later, before fleeing into the darkness. Was that light from the rings sufficient, or did they need to get in close, dare the edge of the deadly sunlight?

He had to fight back his curiosity with a bludgeon.

You make, he thought at himself, *a terrible cynic.*

The ship he was on didn't follow those sowing the crops; it joined another group of ships that descended to the ground. Some here had buildings of two or three stories, the largest he had seen. They landed in a wide ring on the muddy ground. His ship came down and locked in next to an overbearing one with tiers of balconies on the front.

Glowing Eyes stepped up onto one of these and settled into a seat. Nomad inspected the muddy ring as lesser ships locked in on top of one another, creating a tiered structure four or five ships tall. He felt a sinking feeling as he recognized this setup. It was an arena. While the farmers went out to work, the privileged gathered on the front decks of their ships to enjoy some kind of show.

He groaned as his captors affixed a golden set of bracers to his forearms, just like the ones the ember people wore. Once these were in place, his captors hauled him to the front deck of their ship. When he tried to resist—instinctively taking a swing at one—he locked up. Then they easily tossed him down some twelve feet into a patch of rancid, waterlogged earth.

It wasn't the first arena he'd been in, but as he pulled his face from the muck, he decided it was certainly the dirtiest. Several larger vessels that resembled shipping containers landed and opened their front doors. Officials in white coats forced out three tens or so people in ragged clothing, herding them into the ring. Nomad sighed, pulling himself to his feet, trying to ignore the stench of the mud. Considering what he'd been through the last few weeks, he figured the mud was probably trying to do him the same favor.

The prisoners forced into the ring did *not* seem like the fighting type. The poor souls looked almost as tattered and worn as he felt. They stumbled and tripped as they tried to move through the thick sludge, which stained their clothing.

No weapons were offered. So, Nomad thought, not a gladiatorial arena. They weren't here to fight…but they might be here to die. Indeed, another door opened, and three of the ember people strode out, carrying weapons. A ship floated down—its engines' heat uncomfortable—and dropped several large metal crates, each landing in the mud with a wet squelch. Obstacles, ranging in size.

The ember people came in running. The crowd cheered. The unarmed peasants scattered like hogs before a whitespine, frantic.

Delightful.

Nomad dashed through the mud. It only came up to his ankles, but it was treacherously slick, and stuck to his feet with surprising suction. He skidded toward one of the larger boxes, fully eight feet tall, and heaved himself up onto it by his fingertips.

He figured that if he made himself the most difficult target of the bunch, the ember people would chase easier prey first. That might give him time to figure some storming way out of this situation. But as soon as he got onto the box, a pair of black-gloved hands appeared, and a figure climbed up after him. Ember burning at the center of her heart, light green eyes fixed solely on him, her lips snarling. She had short black hair streaked with silver, and her left cheek was scored by a vein of blackness with a glowing line down its center.

While the other two ember people carried whips, this one held a long, wicked machete. Damnation. Why come after him? Nomad glanced toward the throne above where Glowing Eyes watched with interest.

Do you think, the knight asks his faithful squire, he wants to see what you can do?

“No,” Nomad whispered, backing away from the ember woman. “Remember the anger the leader displayed? The others treated me with some reverence for escaping the sun. He hated that.”

This wasn’t a test. Glowing Eyes wanted Nomad to be killed in public. Wanted him humiliated and defeated for everyone to see.

The ember woman came in swinging at Nomad, so he turned and leaped from the top of the enormous crate toward a smaller one. Here, he rolled purposefully off into the mud, pretending to scramble and find something there. As the ember woman came bounding down toward him, he heaved upward with a newly formed crowbar—deliberately *not* trying to hit the woman, but only to deflect the machete.

His body didn't lock up. So long as he was focused solely on defense, it seemed that he could resist. He shoved the ember woman aside, causing her to lose her balance and fall. She was up a second later, half her face covered in mud, glaring at him in a feral way. She didn't seem shocked by the sudden appearance of his weapon, and he'd tried to hide how he'd obtained it with his roll and fall. He hoped those watching above would assume that he dug it from the sludge somehow, that it was some piece of junk left by some other passing group.

Growling, the woman came scrambling for him. Behind, one of the poor peasants had been backed into a corner. An ember man grabbed her and thrust her aloft toward the sky with one arm. The crowd yelled in delight while the woman screamed in panic, though she didn't seem to have been hurt.

Nomad dodged once, twice, three times—narrowly avoiding machete blows from the ember woman, who moved with supernatural speed and grace. He had more trouble with the mud than she did. Despite his years on the run, soil still felt unnatural to him. It was wrong not to have solid stone underfoot.

As a second person was caught, Nomad blocked another blow from the machete—then barely stopped himself from hitting the woman with a backswing. Storms, it was hard to restrain himself. But he also couldn't dodge forever. Eventually those two other ember people would come for him.

He hit the woman's machete extra hard on the next clash, knocking the weapon free from her muddied hand. As she howled at him for that, he turned and ran, hooking his crowbar on his belt—covertly making a small loop to secure it. He didn't look to see if she followed, instead leaping onto a set of smaller boxes, then hurling himself up toward the tallest one, some fifteen feet high.

He barely grabbed the top, trying to haul himself up. Unfortunately his hands were slick with mud, and he started to fall.

Until a gloved hand caught him by the wrist. There was a man on top of the box already, one of the peasants—a tad heavyset, with pale skin, brown eyes, and a dimpled chin. With a determined expression, the man heaved, pulling Nomad the rest of the way up.

Nomad nodded to the grime-covered man, who gave him a gap-toothed smile in return. He glanced at Nomad's weapon, then asked a question, sounding confused.

Something about…you killing? Aux said. *I'm sorry. I can barely make out any of this. You need to get some Investiture.*

"Sorry, friend," Nomad said to the man. "Can't understand. But thank you."

The man joined him in watching the arena. Another captive was giving the ember people some trouble, dodging well, scrambling through the mud. It took two to eventually capture the poor woman.

The ember woman who had fought Nomad still ignored all other prey. She strode carefully around the large box, planning her ascent. As one more person was captured, the rest of the peasants gave up running, falling to their knees or leaning against walls, puffing in exhaustion.

The ones who had been captured were herded toward a different ship, screaming and crying—though notably not fighting back. Curious. From the way they acted, Nomad got the sense that—

"That bunch who were caught first are another set of condemned, Aux," he guessed. "To be left for the sun."

So… Auxiliary said in his head. *This was some elaborate game of tag? To determine who's next in line to be executed?*

"That's my best guess," Nomad said. "Look how relieved the others are not to have been caught."

Relieved, yes, the knight says with a morose sense of melancholy. But also…sad.

Auxiliary was right. Many of the survivors turned pained eyes toward the ones who had been taken. One man even screamed in a begging posture, falling to his knees, gesturing to offer himself instead. These captives all knew each other. The ones who had been taken were friends, maybe family members, of those who had survived.

Nomad's ally started to climb down, but the contest wasn't completely over. Not yet. Though the two other ember people had moved off after corralling the condemned, the third one—the woman with the silver in her hair—surged along the jumble of crates toward Nomad's perch.

She wouldn't stop until he'd been killed, he was certain of it. Well then. Time to see if he could trick his Torment. He waited tensely as the ember woman approached.

Nomad? Auxiliary asked. *What are you doing?*

"How heavy an object can you become?" he asked. "Without using up any of our BEUs?"

Every transformation I make uses a tiny bit of Investiture, but mostly not worth accounting. So I assume you're asking what I can become without dipping into and greatly draining our reserves. Under those restraints, I can become a mass of metal weighing about a hundred pounds or so. Why?

Nomad waited until the ember woman was nearly upon him—leaping for his box from the next perch over. At that moment, Nomad hurled himself toward her. He raised Auxiliary over his head—worrying that he'd have to reveal his secret—and created a barbell of the maximum weight. Nomad held it in front of him, as if poised to swing it.

In response, his Torment sensed he was trying to do harm. His arms locked up. But the ember woman still slammed right into the large chunk of metal, gasping as the two of them smashed together in midair.

He essentially became another deadweight. They both plummeted to the mud below, and he landed on top of her, his barbell hitting her in the chest, his elbow smashing her throat. The combined weight drove her into the soft ground.

When Nomad stumbled to his feet, she remained down—conscious but stunned. Her ember fluttered, like an eye blinking in exhaustion.

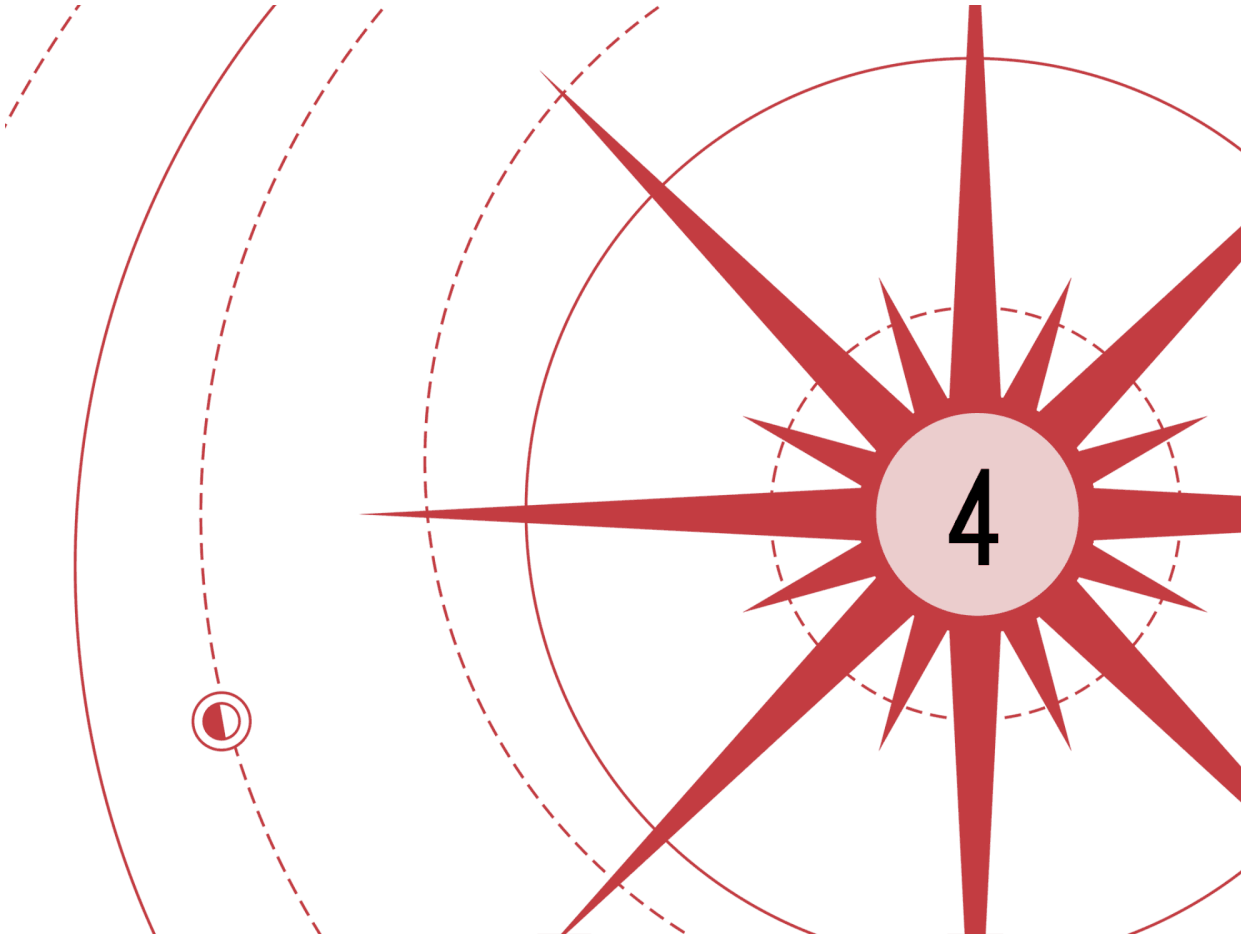
The crowd's yelling became a deathly silence.

"Doesn't happen often, does it?" Nomad shouted, turning toward Glowing Eyes, seated on his balcony at the head of the arena. "Someone defeating your soldiers. Why would it ever happen, though? These are Invested warriors, and you pit them against unarmed peasants!"

Glowing Eyes didn't reply, of course. Storms, Nomad hated bullies. He stepped forward, as if to challenge the man. As he did, however, a piercing shock of *cold* swept through him, originating at his wrists.

He looked down at the bracers he'd been given. They were leeching body heat right out of him, leaving him frozen, his muscles immobilized. He exhaled, his breath misting. He glared at Glowing Eyes—who held a device with buttons on it.

"B-bastard," Nomad said through chattering teeth. Then fell face-first into the mud, unconscious.



WHEN NOMAD WOKE this time, he found himself manacled to a wall. No…it was the outside of a boxy ship, one of those forming the arena. He'd been chained right up against the side of the thing, pulled spread-eagle on a flat piece of metal ten feet by ten feet.

It seemed he hadn't been out for very long, though it was impossible for him to be sure with no sun in the sky. Just those dramatic, sweeping rings.

He tried to move, but was held tightly against the ship at both his wrists and ankles. The rowdy crowd was still in place, though a small ship with a podium framed by four ornate columns had settled into the center of the arena. It was open to the air and looked like its only purpose was to be a speaking platform—the small ship's front deck giving a regal place for a leader to stand and address people. Glowing Eyes perched atop it, addressing the crowd, stoking their enthusiasm.

"Auxiliary," Nomad growled. "Did I miss anything relevant?"

They moved the boxes out of the way, Aux replied. *Then strapped you here. I'm trying to make sense of that speech, but I haven't caught more than a word or two. Some of this is about you. And…an "example"?*

"Lovely," Nomad said, struggling against the chains.

I don't think they realized or saw what you did with me, Auxiliary continued. *With the barbell, I mean. The angle was wrong. So I turned into a crowbar again when they pulled you out of the mud. They examined me, then tossed me aside, assuming I was nothing important. I'm still out in the mud, off to your left.*

Well, that was something. Nomad could summon the weapon at any time, making it vanish, then appear in his hands. The bonds on his wrists were tight, but Auxiliary could become all kinds of odd shapes. One might work for freeing Nomad. But if he wasn't in immediate danger, then there was no reason to reveal what he could do. So for now, Nomad considered other methods. Perhaps if he broke his thumb, he could get his hand out, then let it heal. Unfortunately he healed fractures much more slowly than bruises.

Movement off to his left caught his eye. He turned his head as well as he could and noticed a swiveling black box with a blinking light. A security camera? It lingered on him for a moment, then rotated away toward the podium.

Glowing Eyes's voice rose to a crescendo as he gestured to Nomad. Damnation. Even if he could get free, he still had on the bracers that froze him. And he was still surrounded by enemies that he couldn't fight and cameras that could track him. What good would it do to get a hand free in such a situation?

You might be in real trouble this time, Auxiliary said.

"You think?"

Do I think? I'm not sure. Depends on your definition.

"You know, I liked you much better when you were alive."

And who is to blame for that?

Nomad snarled and raged against the chains. His attention was finally drawn away from his predicament, however, as several officials led a few ragged captives up to the podium ship. Glowing Eyes seized each of them in turn by the throat, and they seemed to wilt, their skin growing ashen. When he tossed them aside, they were corpses, and the ember in his chest grew brighter.

The crowd cheered, and then that cheering built as another captive was dragged to the podium ship. Two guards in white coats accompanied her, one

carrying a long spear, while the other had a rifle. Glowing Eyes didn't grab this captive, but instead raised his hands to let the crowd yell.

Nomad's eyes lingered on that rifle. It was the first modern weapon he'd seen here. Were those rare? He inspected this latest captive and realized it was the woman who had done so well avoiding capture. The one it had taken two ember people to catch.

"That woman…" Nomad said. "She was one of the better fighters—or at least, better dodgers—in the arena earlier. Perhaps because she fought well, they're going to reward her?"

Glowing Eyes gestured to the woman, and the crowd roared. He slapped her on the shoulder in an almost congratulatory way. But then the captive woman started to struggle harder, and Nomad got a sinking feeling.

Not my problem, he thought to himself.

Glowing Eyes waved to the side, and one of the guards handed him the spear. Glowing Eyes removed a sheath, revealing that the spearhead itself had a glowing ember at the tip—so bright that it left a trail in Nomad's vision.

The captive screamed.

Glowing Eyes rammed the spear into the woman's chest.

Nomad had just the right angle to see what happened next. Glowing Eyes yanked out the spear, leaving the ember behind. The officials scattered in a panic, though Glowing Eyes remained, unconcerned. The agonized captive fell to her knees, her screams intensifying as searing heat flared at her core. Sparks and jets of flame sprayed out, like from a stoked campfire, individual motes scoring the skin of her arms and face—leaving streaks that continued to glow even after the central fire in her chest subsided.

The woman finally slumped to the side, although her eyes didn't close. She lay there, staring sightlessly, the quiet flame in her chest illuminating the podium floor.

Well, Auxiliary said, *I guess now we know where those ember people come from.*

"Agreed," Nomad said, feeling sick. "My guess is they choose the most agile captives to be elevated. After all, the ones he fed upon were some of the weaker captives."

A stretch, perhaps, but logical enough.

Nomad took a deep breath. "That might give us an opportunity. You think we could absorb whatever powers those spears? Maybe get enough BEUs to escape this planet?"

No, I'd say it isn't powerful enough for a Skip, Auxiliary said. *Hard to say without more information, but I'd guess a spear like that has a couple thousand BEUs—maybe ten to twenty percent Skip capacity at most. More than enough to give you a Connection to the planet, though. You'd finally be able to understand what people are saying, and have a reserve left for healing or powering me up.*

As the guards returned to drag off the newly made ember woman, Glowing Eyes strode back onto the podium, and someone approached with two more spears. Glowing Eyes took one and whipped its sheath off, revealing a second glowing tip—like metal heated white-hot, yet somehow never cooling. The crowd shouted and cheered even louder.

"I'll bet," Nomad said, "he's going to use one of those on me. He tried to get me killed, but his people failed. So now he's going to try something else."

Ah, the hero says with a sense of understanding. Yes, that's reasonable. Why isn't he worried that you'll turn against him once you're given powers?

"I suspect he counts on the freezing bracers to control the others, and he just proved to himself they work on me."

Seems dangerous.

"Agreed," Nomad said.

In this case, the situation wouldn't play out as Glowing Eyes expected. If he touched the spear tip to Nomad, he'd be able to absorb the power from it. It was one of the few useful aspects of his Torment. Nomad had gained an unusual ability to metabolize nearly any kind of Investiture, although he sometimes required Auxiliary's help.

Right. But why are there two spears?

"They'll want to do me last," Nomad said. "As the big finish. So I assume there is another poor captive to be…"

He trailed off as they pulled a second person up onto the podium: the gap-toothed man who had helped Nomad earlier. As soon as he saw the poor fellow, Nomad realized it made sense. He'd just been theorizing that they turned the best fighters into ember people. This fellow might be a little overweight, but he'd managed to elude capture—and had even gone out of his way to help Nomad, who was aggressively being targeted.

The man's grit had earned him a terrible reward. The crowd cheered as Glowing Eyes raised the second spear. The poor captive screamed a piteous sound, pulling against his captors.

Not my problem, Nomad told himself, closing his eyes.

But he could still hear. And somehow, in shutting out the light—there within the blackness of his own design—he felt something. Something of the person he'd once been.

Words once spoken. In a moment of glorious radiance.

Damnation, he thought as the man's terrified shouts shook him to the core.

Nomad forced his eyes open and *ripped* his right hand out of the manacle, his supernatural strength shattering the thumb and tearing the skin along the sides of his hand. He raised his bleeding hand above his head and to the side, then summoned Auxiliary from the mud.

Holding the hilt with only his fingers against his palm, Nomad whipped his hand forward, throwing Auxiliary to spin—flashing and glorious—through the air. Aux slammed into one of the pillars on the podium right next to Glowing Eyes's head—a six-foot-long glittering sword, Auxiliary's truest form. It sank deeply into the pillar and hung there, quivering.

The crowd hushed.

Huh, Auxiliary said in his head. *I thought you couldn't do that anymore.*

He'd intentionally aimed away from Glowing Eyes. By not threatening anyone, Nomad could avoid triggering the Torment. That said, it had been a while since he had seen the full Blade, been able to access it in all its glory. As he'd hoped, Glowing Eyes was stunned by this spectacular apparition. He gaped at the sword in confusion, forgetting his captive. The gap-toothed man shrank back in the grip of his guards, but hadn't been touched by the spear yet.

Nomad resummoned Auxiliary, trying to form the Blade again. He failed. The Torment had slipped up once, but now it was on guard. No weapons. Nomad raised Auxiliary high in the form of a tall pole. His thumb screamed in pain, but a bracer at the bottom held it in place, letting him grip it with his unbroken fingers. He formed it into a wrench next, then a crowbar.

Glowing Eyes watched the weapon, entranced, a visible hunger in his wide eyes. He stumbled off the platform, carrying the spear. Fixated on Nomad.

"Good," Nomad whispered. He met those glowing eyes, daring them forward. "Good. You want this. Come, try to take *me* as one of your slaves. Then you can command me to give it to you, right?"

The man approached, paused, then held the spear in front of him, threatening.

"I don't fancy being stabbed as I absorb the Investiture," Nomad said to Auxiliary. "You want to handle this one?"

Yes, Auxiliary said. *Just form me as a receptacle—or even a standard shield—on your chest as he stabs, and I'll recycle the energy.*

Glowing Eyes hesitated a few feet from Nomad.

"Come on, you!" Nomad shouted. "Stab me!"

The man put the white-hot spear tip near Nomad's eye and demanded something.

"I don't speak your tongue, idiot," Nomad said. "Just stab me!"

The man waved at Nomad's hands, speaking again, sterner.

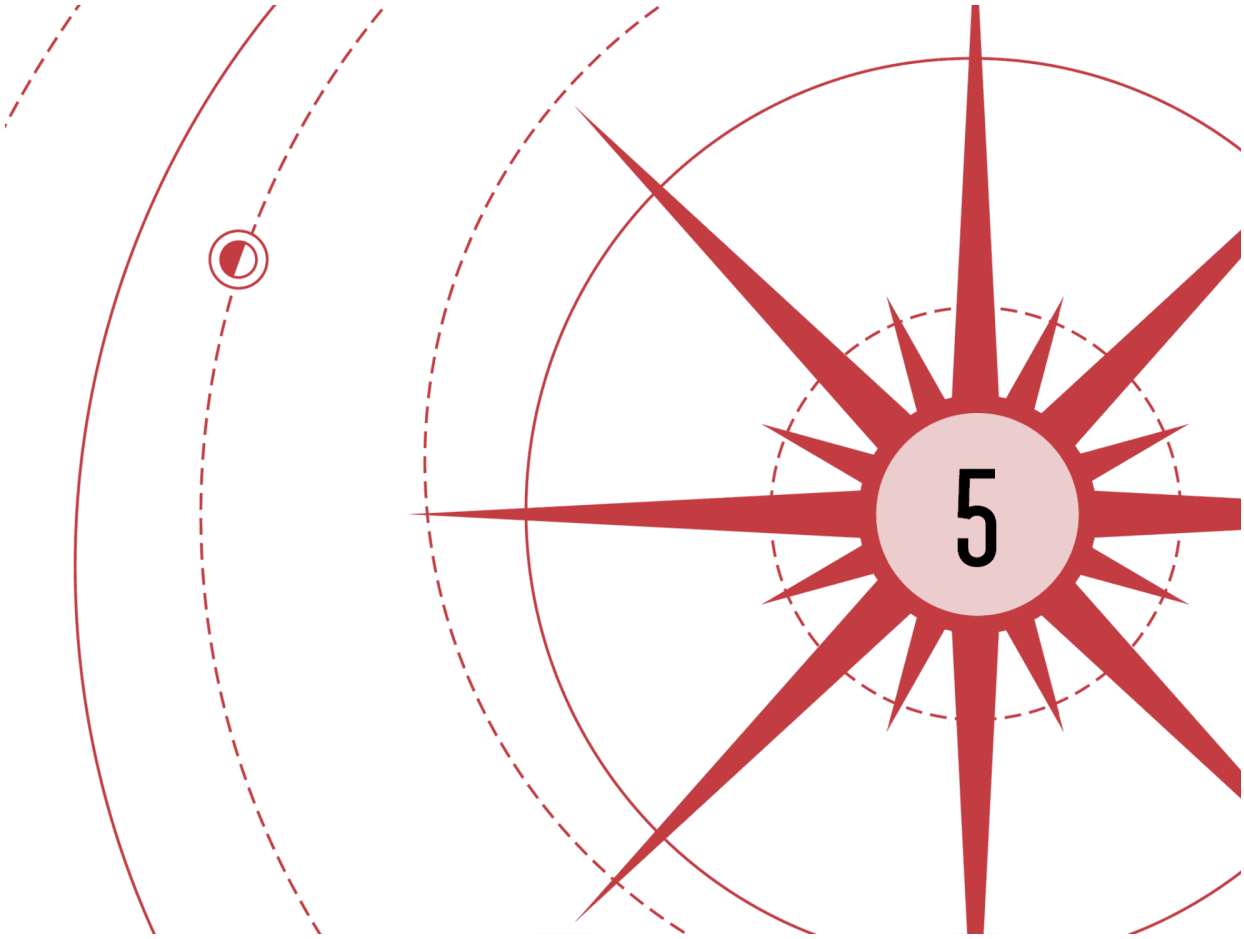
He wants you to show him, the knight explains to his sometimes-dense squire, how you summon the tools.

Instead Nomad summoned a nice dollop of spit—spiced with the mud that still crusted his lips—and delivered it right into the bastard's eye. The spittle *hissed*, as if on a hot plate, and the man jerked back, furious.

He pointed his spear at Nomad's chest, growling, causing the crowd to cheer.

Here we go, Nomad thought.

At that moment, one of the nearby ships exploded.



NOMAD CRIED OUT in frustration as Glowing Eyes turned toward the sound, then began shouting orders as he strode—tall and unflinching—back toward the podium.

Weapon fire—blasts with a distinctly red-white heat—rained from the sky. Glowing Eyes shouted something else, and ember people—a good two hundred of them—came running out onto the rims of ships. Then, as one, their embers dulled.

Their bracers were activating. Nomad's did as well, but in a panic, he summoned Auxiliary in a specific shape—two thin metal bracers *underneath* the ones on his arms, separating them from touching his skin. It was an odd construction, as he generally had to make Auxiliary into pieces that were touching—so these weird bracers-under-his-bracers were connected by a rod.

It worked, though, keeping him from being frozen this time.

Clever, the knight compliments his squire with true appreciation. That's an odd shape, even for you.

He could manage practically anything with Auxiliary, assuming he could make it from the appropriate amount of metal. And assuming he understood the construction on a fundamental level. He'd failed to make a clock, for example, until he'd carefully studied the schematics for one.

The remnants of the scholar inside him whispered that he was too simple with this power—that he could do much greater things if he practiced. There just wasn't a lot of time for anything in his life other than running, and the constant pressure sometimes left it difficult to summon the imagination for any but the most obvious solutions.

Regardless, his bracers buzzed as if annoyed to be rendered nonfunctional by being unable to touch his skin. The ember people had no such protection—and they dropped like toddlers at nap time, collapsing where they were, falling into the mud.

Glowing Eyes spun around, obviously shocked by this turn of events. Whatever was happening to them, it seemed to be the actions of the attacking enemy. In any other circumstance, the look on that man's face would have been comical, but Nomad couldn't pause to appreciate it, as the ship he was chained to slowly rose away from the arena floor. It got about five feet up before a blast hit it from above. A violent explosion ripped it apart, ejecting the part with Nomad from the rest of the disintegrating vessel.

On the plus side, Nomad dropped to the ground.

On the minus side, a smoking, sparking piece of the ship came with him. He hit the ground with it right on top of him. His body protested this rough treatment, and all the air was knocked out of him. Invested or not, if he hadn't fallen into the soft mire, he'd have been crushed.

As it was, he was stuck there in the muddy darkness, the huge weight pressing him down—his thumb still broken and healing slowly—as a firefight broke out above.

Oh, come on. He could hold his breath practically forever—with his highly Invested soul renewing his cells in much the same way the sun here made the plants grow. But his chance to steal a weapon was dwindling by the moment.

Nomad, the hero says to his exceptionally lazy valet, this is no time to take a rest.

Nomad gurgled an annoyed reply through the mud.

Yes, that was *a joke on my part,* Auxiliary said. *Proof that I'm not completely mirthless since my death. But, to be more serious, you should probably try to get out of this. That sunrise is going to arrive eventually. I tasted the strength of it earlier. Let it catch you here and you'll be vaporized. Right now I don't have the strength to shield you from such power, and there's no way we can absorb something so potent.*

An explosion shook the ground, vibrating Nomad where he was stuck. His left hand was still manacled to the large piece of wall on top of him. He could pull it free, maybe, but that would probably break his thumb or wrist at the same time, which seemed like a bad idea. His right hand was healing but mostly useless.

Fortunately he could feel air on his legs and even move them. His ankles were sore. He guessed the bonds there had been ripped free in the blast and that the piece of wreckage holding him down covered only his top half.

Right, then. He tried imagining Auxiliary as a knife first—but that didn't work, even though Nomad insisted he was making a tool, not a weapon. He needed something else. He thought back to his days as an aspiring scholar—that seemed so, so long ago—and imagined a jack for lifting something heavy.

The more complicated an item Nomad needed Auxiliary to be, the longer it took—unless he'd been turned into the same thing many times. The jack took a while and formed wrong the first time, so Nomad had to try again. But eventually he got Auxiliary to appear next to his right hand in the appropriate shape, with the jack's saddle just underneath the metal's edge.

Nomad didn't have much maneuverability, but he was able to move his free hand onto the specifically designed crank and rotate it a few times. It was enough to lift the metal up perceptibly.

Another clever adaptation, Auxiliary said. *Glad to see some of the old you shining through.*

Fresh air flowed in as he slowly turned the fallen piece of wall into a sort of lean-to over him. Eventually that gave him the room to get both knees underneath him.

Then, with a supreme effort almost betrayed by the slipperiness of the mud, he *heaved* with his legs and flipped himself over. This planted the metal wall down into the mud with him lying on top—one manacle still in place—staring upward.

Ships buzzed around. There wasn't as much blaster fire as he'd thought—these ships didn't have onboard guns. The explosions were from dropped

bombs, and the gunfire he'd seen was all from people wielding rifles on the decks. The ships also couldn't get very high; the highest he saw them flying was fifty or sixty feet. These weren't proper warplanes, but more hovercraft with a little extra oomph.

All through the arena, plants had started sprouting. Just weeds, but it was amazing how quickly this barren pit of mud was becoming a field from only the light reflected off those rings.

"There's Investiture in the light coming from the rings," Nomad said. "Can we absorb that?"

Slowly, it seems, Auxiliary replied. *There isn't much. Maybe ten or twenty BEUs an hour?*

Damnation. Well, most of the ships that had formed the arena had launched into the air, and Glowing Eyes was nowhere to be seen—though many of his ember-hearted subordinates lay in the mud where they'd fallen. This was Nomad's best chance to escape, maybe steal a ship.

He tried to form Auxiliary as a pair of bolt cutters, but even *that* was too much of a weapon for the Torment at the moment. Why had it let him form a Blade one time, and now forbade bolt cutters? He tried a crowbar, leaning on it to get it to break him free of the wall, but he couldn't get the leverage right with his broken thumb.

As Nomad slipped in the mud, a smaller, four-person hovercyle came roaring down, frying plants with its jets. Two people jumped free, a man and a woman. The man carried a rifle, but neither had the white uniform coats of the guards he'd encountered before. They were the aggressors, it seemed—the ones who had attacked Glowing Eyes and his group. Enemies of his enemies, dared he hope?

"Hey!" Nomad shouted as they dashed past. "Hey!"

The woman glanced at him, but the man ignored him, searching the ground for something. A ship went roaring past, the narrow deck crowded with people in dirty clothing. It scooted off into the distance.

It's a rescue mission, Nomad realized. *Those were captives from earlier.*

"*Hey!*" he shouted louder. He held up the crowbar, waving for them. "Help me!"

The two people turned away from him, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out what they were looking for in these weeds. Then, not far off, someone sat up—one of the ember men. He looked lethargic, but…

"Whatever you did to them is wearing off!" Nomad yelled.

The rescuers continued their frantic searching through the growing grass until the man called to the woman, who joined him, and together they heaved a muddy figure up from the grass.

It was the ember woman who had hunted Nomad during the arena melee earlier. She was unmistakable with the silver mixed into her hair, the single glowing mark on her cheek. She looked dazed and disoriented as the two hauled her back toward their vehicle. They walked right past Nomad.

"Storm you!" Nomad said, struggling against his bond. "At least *look* at me!"

They didn't, instead loading their captive onto their hovercycle, locking her with manacles to one of the back two seats. They didn't trust this ember woman. Perhaps they were taking a captive for some kind of ransom or prisoner exchange?

All right. Nomad would need to break his other hand to get free. At least the one he'd broken earlier was mostly healed. He tried yanking his captive hand out and heard—through his agony—the bone snap. But the hand didn't pull free. Damnation! This manacle was tighter than the other, and even with a broken thumb, he couldn't get it out.

Nomad, you're dangerously low on Investiture, Auxiliary said. *You're going to start dipping beneath five percent if you need much more healing. It will weaken you, and remove many of your endurance and strength enhancements.*

Damnation. He waved toward the two people again, but the man of the pair suddenly screamed as a blast of energy hit him on the shoulder. He stumbled back, and the next shot vaporized his entire head.

The body dropped to the weeds as the woman cried out in anguish, barely thinking to take cover behind her hovercycle. Overhead, a ship lowered—the one with a large podium on the back and four pillars at the sides.

Glowing Eyes himself—face lit by the fire within him—stood on the edge, a rifle in hand, and sighted. He fired again at the woman, blasting off a small part of her long, four-seater hovercycle.

She huddled in its shadow, facing Nomad. She managed to grab her fallen companion's rifle, but when she popped up to fire, Glowing Eyes almost took her head off with an expert shot. She, in turn, only got a few wild blasts off that came nowhere *near* to hitting. She fired again and was even *farther* off.

"You need my help," Nomad said, gesturing to the crowbar. "Come on."

She glanced back at him.

“Come on,” he said, tears in his eyes at the pain of his wounded hand. “Come on!”

She said something unintelligible. Then, noticing he didn’t understand, she held up the rifle.

“Yeah, I know how to fire one,” he said, nodding. “I’m better at aiming than you seem to be.”

Liar, Auxiliary said.

“It’s not a lie,” he said. “I am a good shot.”

You’ll lock up the moment you touch a gun.

“She doesn’t understand anyway,” he said, nodding eagerly to the woman.

Meanwhile, beyond the uncomprehending woman, Glowing Eyes was forced to turn and deal with other ships threatening him—dropping bombs aimed at his ship. During that distraction, the woman rescuer finally scrambled over to Nomad and took the crowbar. She struggled, throwing her weight onto it, trying to break the chain where the manacle was tied to the wall. The motion jostled his broken thumb, and he cried out.

Unfortunately the manacle was made of strong stuff. Before she could get him free, Glowing Eyes turned his attention back toward them.

“Go!” Nomad said, pointing at the man.

The woman caught on and ran away. Nomad twisted, dismissing Auxiliary, then immediately summoning him again as a shield on his arm. That intercepted the shots Glowing Eyes fired. Nomad crouched on his knees, sheltering behind his shield, one hand still trapped beneath him and attached to the wall.

The woman huddled beside her hovercycle as—atop it—the ember woman groaned. She was waking up.

“The gun,” Nomad said, pointing and waving.

Hesitant, eyes distrustful, the woman tossed it to him as another barrage of fire rained down. He didn’t dare dismiss the shield, but he *could* alter its shape—giving it long spikes at the bottom that he could ram into the earth so he no longer needed to hold it. He huddled there and—with a single hand—awkwardly moved the rifle around toward the lock.

You’re going to blow your hand off, Auxiliary warned.

“Eh,” Nomad said. “I’ve got two.”

He fired. As he’d hoped, it blew the lock and let him pull his wounded hand free. He grabbed the shield and moved up close to the woman’s ship, huddling beside her.

Healing your other broken thumb now. This is about it, unless you want to drop below five percent.

"Fine, great," he said, examining the hovercycle. "How hard would it be for me to steal this thing? Have you seen how they start the engines?"

You're despicable, Aux said. *This woman saved you. You'd steal her ship?*

"She only did it under duress. How do I start the engines?"

I haven't seen.

Blast. Well, he needed to get rid of Glowing Eyes. Nomad set up with the rifle right beside the seat where the ember woman was strapped down. She glared at him and growled as he insistently told himself he was not going to fire at any person in particular, just kind of randomly.

It worked, though only if he aimed very far away. He blasted the air, and it was enough to frighten Glowing Eyes back for a moment. The woman who had saved Nomad glared at him, shouting something and waving her hands.

I believe she's mad about your bad aim.

"Lady," Nomad said, "I'm having a really bad day. If you're going to scream at me, could you at least do it a little softer?"

She grabbed the gun from him, then fired, keeping Glowing Eyes at bay. Then she gestured at the hovercycle and spoke.

I believe she's offering to take you, Auxiliary said, *if you use the shield to protect her from behind as she flies.*

That would do. He shook his wounded hand, eager for the healing to take hold. Then he paused, scanning the field full of quickly growing tall grasses. The podium had been right over there, hadn't it? He thought he saw something in the grass nearby. A body?

Damnation. Cursing himself for a fool, Nomad held up Auxiliary for cover and dashed in that direction—ignoring the woman's cries of surprise. There, in the muddy ground near where the center of the arena had been, he found the gap-toothed man. He was almost buried in the mud, leg twisted in the wrong direction, his face bleeding from what might have been a kick—doubtless one delivered by the soldiers who had thrown him free when the fighting started.

The poor man looked up and saw Nomad. And even as bombs fell and a glowing line of automatic rifle rounds tossed up soil and burned grass nearby, something sparked in the man's eyes. Hope.

Nomad seized the man by the arm and heaved, ripping him out of the muddy soil and throwing him across his shoulders. Unable to keep Auxiliary up with his wounded hand, Nomad dropped the shield and dashed through

the battlefield, the weight of forgotten oaths on his shoulders. He somehow avoided being shot as he reached the hovercycle and threw the man onto one of the seats. The back left one, across from the ember woman. Hopefully her manacles would hold.

The man, tears in his eyes, whispered a few words. Nomad didn't need to know the language to sense the gratitude in them.

That was uncharacteristic of you, Auxiliary said as Nomad summoned him again as a shield.

"He reminds me of an old friend, that's all." Nomad looked to the woman, still taking cover beside the hovercycle, and gestured toward his shield.

She growled something at him, then held up three fingers, counting down. At zero, he leaped onto the top of the hovercycle, kneeling on the middle of the fuselage between the seats. The woman took the operator's seat, front left. Nomad expanded his shield, growing it big enough to cover them both. He couldn't protect the gap-toothed man, but hopefully attention would be on the driver instead.

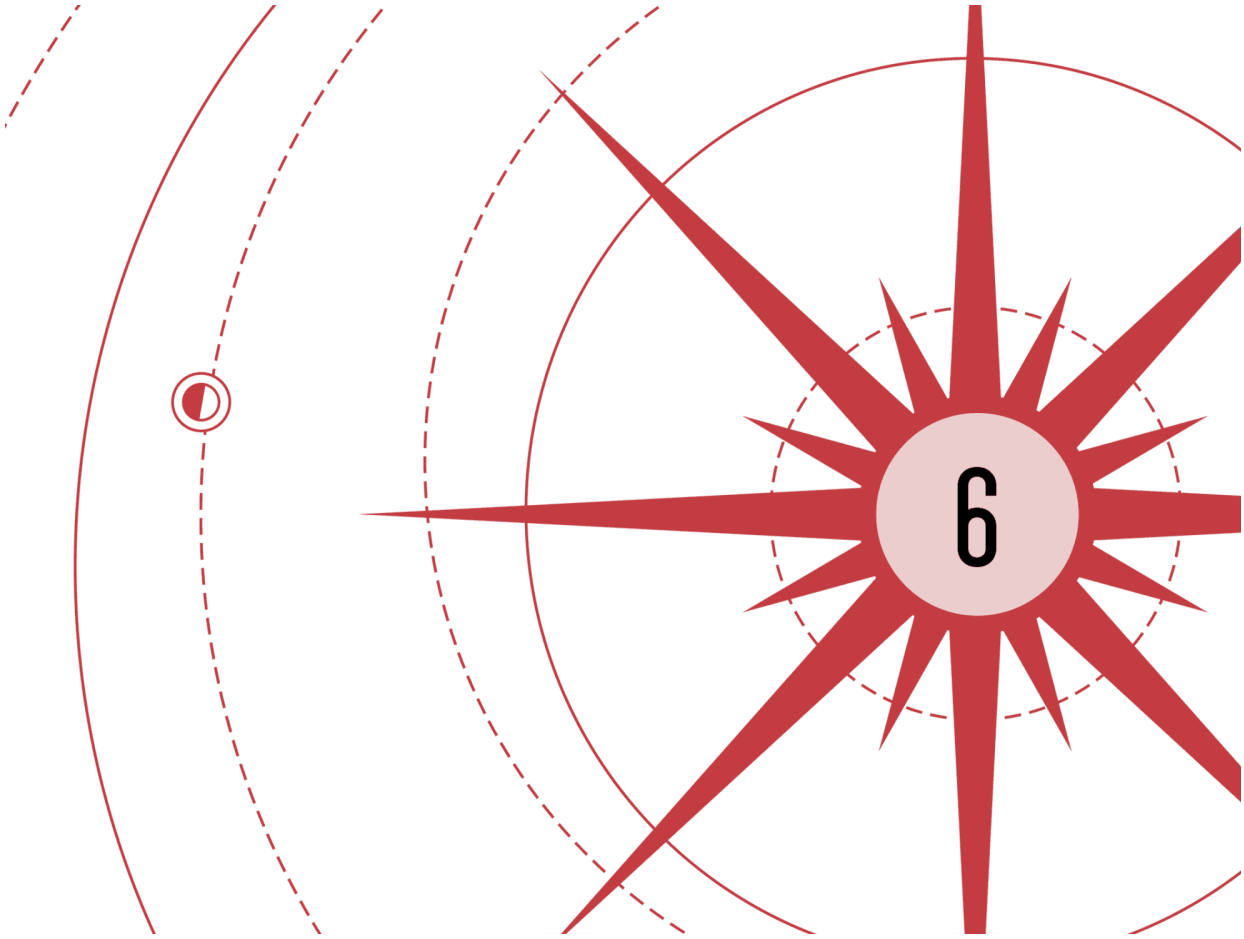
Nomad watched carefully as she fired up the machine. Unlike the big ships, which doubled as buildings, these cycles were intended only as vehicles. She pulled a lever and pushed a button, then paused, gazing toward the headless corpse of her companion.

"Fly!" Nomad said, nudging her as blasts hit his shield. Another enemy ship had noticed them and pivoted to come at them. Worse, the other ember people were all rising from the field of grass like Awakened corpses. Several turned toward them—particularly after the one tied to the back right seat, now fully awake, began shouting and raving.

Finally the woman lifted off and sent them in a low flight just above the grass, following others of her group who—together—fled with the rescued captives. For a moment Nomad thought they'd escaped. He saw Glowing Eyes watching from a distance, standing tall on his podium ship.

But the man didn't need to give chase personally, because in moments, several ships landed to gather the people with embers in their chests. Most of the friendly ships that had executed the hit-and-run attack were far ahead, almost out of sight. Nomad's craft was the lone straggler.

So, naturally, the ships bearing the ember people targeted him.



NOMAD TAPPED ON the driver's shoulder and thumbed backward. She quickly glanced over her shoulder, said something he was quite certain was a curse, then bent lower over the controls. He reached for her rifle, but she put a protective hand on it and glared at him.

Great. He could just kick her free and take the vehicle; he was relatively certain he could fly it. But then she pulled up, gaining elevation.

Something about getting away from the dirty ground, up into the sky toward those rings…it had an effect on him. Wind against his face, the landscape shrinking below. It reminded him of better times. Pure, crisp air acting like a moral decongestant.

He smiled at that thought. It was wordplay his former master would have liked. And maybe there *was* something to be said for the thinner air up here. Maybe he had been, after all, a little bit airsick…

Nah. That was *absolutely* going too far.

Still, he kept his shield in place and didn't try to steal the cycle. Instead he focused on the enemies behind. They crowded onto two sleek war barges. Long and flat, with large decks on the front and cabs at the back. Like flying speedboats, though with the control room farther back and more of a deck on the bow. Ember people stood on those decks, clinging to the railings. Their embers stoked in the wind, growing brighter, like headlights. Their postures determined, eager.

And they were gaining. How had the rescuers expected to pull off their raid when flying inferior ships? A sharpshooter in a white coat stepped out the side door of the cabin onto the deck on one of the warships and took aim. Nomad raised Auxiliary as a shield and noticed that the sharpshooter wasn't one of the ember people. Those appeared to have only melee weapons.

The sharpshooter fired. Not at Nomad or the driver, but at the central fuselage between the seats. As he'd noticed earlier, this cycle he flew on had a strange construction. It featured a long central core with four open seats at the sides—each one designed to be straddled, with handholds on the front and its own windshield.

It was…like four smaller cycles had been attached to a larger core. Three of the spots were taken, and while there was a seat for Nomad at the front right, he was instead clinging to the center of the machine—holding tightly to an improvised handhold with one hand, using his shield with the other to protect his driver's back.

The sharpshooter's blast had hit about three feet away from Nomad, farther along the core fuselage. His driver cursed, looking back past him. He turned his shield transparent to let her see—because the sharpshooter fired again in the same spot, blowing off a piece of the cycle. This exposed some of the underlying mechanism, which glowed brightly.

Nomad, sensing the driver's panic, slid down the fuselage and blocked the next shot—which exploded into sparks against his shield. He'd positioned himself directly behind the place the sharpshooter had targeted, hanging on with one hand to the slick side of the metal housing.

This gave him a good view of what the enemy had targeted: a small hatch on the fuselage. That, blown free, showed a compartment that cradled a brightly glowing chunk of stone…or maybe glass? Roughly the size of a grenade, it had the same red-orange glow as the engines and the blasts the guns were firing.

"Power source?" Nomad guessed, blocking another shot.

Almost assuredly, the knight says almost assuredly.

"Think *that* is powerful enough to get us off of this planet?"

Doubtful.

"It's powerful enough to fly these ships. That's a lot of energy being expended."

Yes, and that is a valid point, but different technologies across different planets are more efficient than others at converting energy to Investiture or vice versa. And your own efficiency at absorption and usage is less than many. My best guess is that you'd need twenty or thirty of those to achieve Skip capacity, but we'll know better once you absorb it. Which I suggest you do only after we land. Unless you'd rather said landing be a little more abrupt than is normally desirable.

"Noted."

Ahead of him, the driver somehow leaned even lower behind the short windshield, the throttle shoved forward as far as it would go. The gap-toothed man Nomad had rescued clung to his seat, eyes wide, hair fluttering in the wind.

Nomad glanced ahead of them, hoping to see a fortress refuge, or a line of reinforcements speeding to their rescue. Instead there was only deep blackness. Above, the rings of the planet appeared to have moved in the sky. But they hadn't actually moved; Nomad's ship was flying forward so fast that it dramatically shifted the angle of the rings from his perspective. They were not only outpacing the rotation of the planet, but changing their orientation compared to stellar bodies.

Storms. They weren't flying *that* fast. How small must this planet be, if flying a short time could round it so quickly? He should have seen from the horizon line, would have seen if he'd been less distracted. But the gravitation was relatively normal, which must mean a dense core, perhaps beyond natural levels for—

Stop, he thought at himself. The man who made calculations like that… you're not that man any longer.

Either way, they were quickly approaching shadows ahead. A place under oppressive cloud cover, where even the reflected sunlight off the rings didn't shine.

The sharpshooter had pulled back inside the cabin, but the enemy ships were gaining on them; Nomad could hear the ember people hooting and shouting. They crowded the front of their platforms, preparing to jump as soon as their ships got close enough to Nomad's cycle.

So, the knight asks, how are you going to survive this *without fighting?*

"I'm hoping the Torment will relax a little," he said. "Maybe take pity on me?"

Good luck with that, the knight replies with an exhaustive amount of rueful skepticism. Nomad missed the days of inflection in that voice. Aux might have started their relationship hesitant to show his true self, but after decades together, his expressiveness had grown and grown. Until…that day.

Nomad refocused on the task at hand, keeping his shield in place. The transparent metal let him watch the approaching ember people as four prepared to leap. Even if he could fight, he'd have trouble handling four at once—particularly with four more coming up on the second ship behind.

Fortunately he had one advantage. Everything he'd seen so far indicated that these beings didn't expect anyone to be as strong as they were. So Nomad took a deep breath, stood up, dashed along the length of the hovercycle, and *jumped*.

It felt familiar.

Wind against his tattered clothing.

An infinite expanse above.

Land below, looking up, aspirational.

Nomad and the sky weren't currently on speaking terms. But they'd been intimate for some time in the past, and he still knew his way around her place.

He felt…stronger now. Where he'd struggled to make the leap onto that box earlier in the day, this time he *soared*.

The ember people watched with shock at the distance he covered. He soared over their heads, hitting the wall of the cabin behind them with enough force to shake the vessel. He slid down it to the front deck of the ship, grinning, summoning Auxiliary as a sword…

Oh right. No swords.

…summoning Auxiliary as an extra-large wrench. He pointed it at the four ember people, then charged them. They made way for him, sidestepping and surrounding him. He didn't swing, though. He spun toward one of them and formed Auxiliary as a shield right as they attacked. He blocked the blow, then threw the ember person back before spinning to block the next attack.

He met each attack with alacrity—though having a huge, transparent, moldable shield *was* an undeniable advantage. He had to be careful not to push them too aggressively, lest his Torment activate.

Nomad, the knight warns, check the other ship.

He glanced to the side, seeing that the second vessel had almost caught up to the hovercycle. His gap-toothed friend was listing, strapped in place but losing consciousness from his pain. The captive ember woman fought against her restraints and howled toward her allies, but the driver—leaning low—was concentrating on trying to fly. She couldn't use her gun, as she had to keep weaving and darting to stay away from the enemy ship.

To no avail. It was faster and more maneuverable. She'd soon have four enemy soldiers crawling along the fuselage toward her. Nomad blocked one more blow, then turned and shoved between two ember people, leaping the distance to the second enemy vessel.

Again, a moment in the air. Glorious.

Then he arrived, just barely grabbing the ship's deck and slamming down beside the vessel, hanging off it. He formed Auxiliary as a ladder, hooked it to a railing above, then scrambled up to face a new group of surprised ember people. Shocked by his sudden appearance, the pilot lost control for a moment, causing the platform to veer toward its companion ship. That let the four ember people there—now wholly focused on Nomad—jump across the narrowed distance. That put all eight in position to fight him on one crowded deck.

Perfect.

In a fight of one against many, chaos favored him. A trained military squad would have easily surrounded and pinned him, but these people didn't fight with coordination. They came at him individually, shouting angrily. They were quick and strong, but their usual advantage over others had taught them the wrong lessons. They thought they didn't need to fight as a team. He'd seen it many times.

He rolled to the deck, skidding and coming up with his shield, blocking the machetes and maces that managed to track him. Other ember people stumbled or tripped one another in their eagerness to get to him. He jumped to his feet, throwing one man back into several others, then leaped closer to the cockpit at the back of the long deck.

Through the window, he saw the pilot in her white coat, watching him with a panicked expression. She hit a button, and a blast shield slid up over her window, sealing her off. Fortunately he wasn't after the pilot. Because Nomad spotted a hatch set into the floor of the deck, similar to the one that had been blown off the hovercycle.

He formed Auxiliary as a crowbar and rammed it into the hatch's lock. The hatch popped open, revealing the power supply.

Ah… the knight says with begrudging admiration.

The power cell inside glowed with a similar light to the spear tip that made the ember people, but the sheen wasn't quite so…violent. To be careful, Nomad formed Auxiliary into a gauntlet on his hand and reached in, then ripped the power cell out. The ember people tried to rush him from behind, but the ship—now without power—dropped beneath them. Nomad got off one last good jump, hurling himself back toward the first warship.

Behind him, the ember people howled as they fell. The unfortunate ship plowed into the ground below just as Nomad landed on its companion.

You should be able to carry that power source without it hurting you, Aux said. *It's different from those spear tips somehow. It is more stable.*

He nodded, taking the glowing power source in one hand while dismissing the gauntlet. As he did, he leaned out over the side, looking down, and noticed that the ember people were pulling themselves from the mud. Here, the ground seemed as wet as it had been at the arena. Maybe rain fell in the darkness. Then, as the planet rotated that landscape toward the sun, the reflected light—and Investiture—of the rings made things grow. Finally the sunrise approached, burning it all away.

What a strange life these people had, always a few hours from total annihilation. No wonder they didn't trust one big, indivisible ship to carry them. Bunches of little engines gave much more redundancy. Not to mention the chance to detach your home from the others and move on ahead if something went wrong with the community.

Remarkably he thought he counted all eight ember people climbing from the wreckage below. Damnation. These things were hard to kill.

He raised his shield and turned toward the cockpit of this ship, where the pilot was accompanied by that sharpshooter. Both stared at him, wide-eyed, through the glass. The sharpshooter raised her rifle at him. And in a panic, she fired—melting holes through the windshield, unloading at him.

Each shot bounced off his shield. Then predictably they tried to raise their own blast shield. So he tossed Auxiliary at the window—jamming him into the mechanism so it failed to cover the half-melted window.

Nomad advanced. Completely unarmed, of course—and worse, completely unable to harm these two. But they didn't know that. He pointed at their gun, then glared down at them. He'd noticed that people here were, on average, shorter than those of his homeworld. He'd often felt short compared to the towering Alethi, but here *he* was the tall one.

Intimidated by the strange man holding an energy core in his bare hand, the sharpshooter obeyed Nomad's demand. She lowered the gun, then—in response to his miming—tossed it out through the ruined windshield. She stepped back, raising her hands. The pilot kept at his controls, and as Nomad seized the gun, the man rolled the ship.

When they returned to verticality, the sharpshooter was collapsed on the cabin's floor. The strapped-in pilot had kept his place. Nomad stood where he had before, Auxiliary having formed a magnetic boot around one of his feet. His heart pounded; he hadn't been sure that would work. He smiled with relief, raised the energy core to his face, and breathed in.

It had taken him months to get the trick of that. He was certain that the "breathing in" part was purely psychological, but it somehow facilitated the action. Being able to feed on Investiture was an aftereffect of the burden he'd once carried, the thing that had given him his Torment.

He needed a power source that was potential, not kinetic. Scientific terms that, in this case, meant he was extremely good at leeching batteries or other stable sources of Investiture. However, something like an energy blast being shot at him or—unfortunately—the power of that sun wouldn't work. Too intense, too kinetic. It was also storming difficult for him to get Investiture out of a person or another living being, requiring very unique circumstances.

In this case, though, he had what he needed: a battery of some sort. He easily absorbed the Investiture of that fragment of the sun—a ball of molten light that somehow wasn't the least bit hot in his fingers. As he took the Investiture in, the entire core dimmed, its energy drained. Depleted, it looked like dark glass or one of the gemstones from his homeworld, except there were more smooth ripples and bumps on its surface, like melted glass or slag.

Inside his head, Auxiliary sighed in satisfaction. *That'll do, the knight tells his unwashed companion.*

"How much did we get?" Nomad asked.

That jumped us up to over ten percent. Still want me to Connect you to this land so you can speak the language?

"Absolutely," Nomad said. "I'm tired of hearing only gibberish."

Right, Aux said. *Give me a few minutes, and I'll have it done.*

Nomad nodded. He pointed the rifle at the pilot, disguising the way his arms locked up by making it seem like he was standing there, stoic, ready to fire. The pilot grew even paler at the sight. Nomad lowered the gun as soon as his muscles relaxed, then gestured to the side.

The pilot obediently took him in close to the fleeing hovercycle. Nomad nodded, then pointed at the pilot and gestured dramatically backward with as much of an ominous expression as he could form. He tried to make the implication as clear as possible: *I'd better not see you following.*

Nomad jumped onto the hovercycle. It seemed the enemy pilot had understood Nomad's command, because he immediately turned his craft and fled toward the other ships that were giving chase in the distance. The landscape was growing darker, and ahead, rainfall masked the air further. As they sped toward it, that sheet of rainfall reminded Nomad of another storm back home. A place he missed terribly but could never visit again, lest he lead the Night Brigade to people who loved him.

The gap-toothed man was staring at him in awe. When had he regained consciousness? The woman flying the hovercycle glanced back. Then paused. Her eyes went wide as she saw the one ship fleeing, the other one nowhere in sight. Storms. Hadn't she been watching? Had she only now noticed what he'd done? Judging by her expression, that was indeed the case.

He sighed. By this point, he had gotten accustomed to the way many outsiders looked. He didn't think they were "childlike" because of their odd eyes; in fact, he had come to recognize the many nuances of countless ethnicities. He knew Alethi with eyes as open and wide as a Shin, while he'd met offworlders who could have passed for Veden—even within a population of people who generally wouldn't have.

Still, he couldn't help thinking they looked a little bug-eyed when expressing surprise. Well, to each their own. He clambered forward to the seat to her right. In the process, though, he caught his foot and dropped his rifle over the side.

He leaned out and reached for it, then came up empty-handed and shrugged.

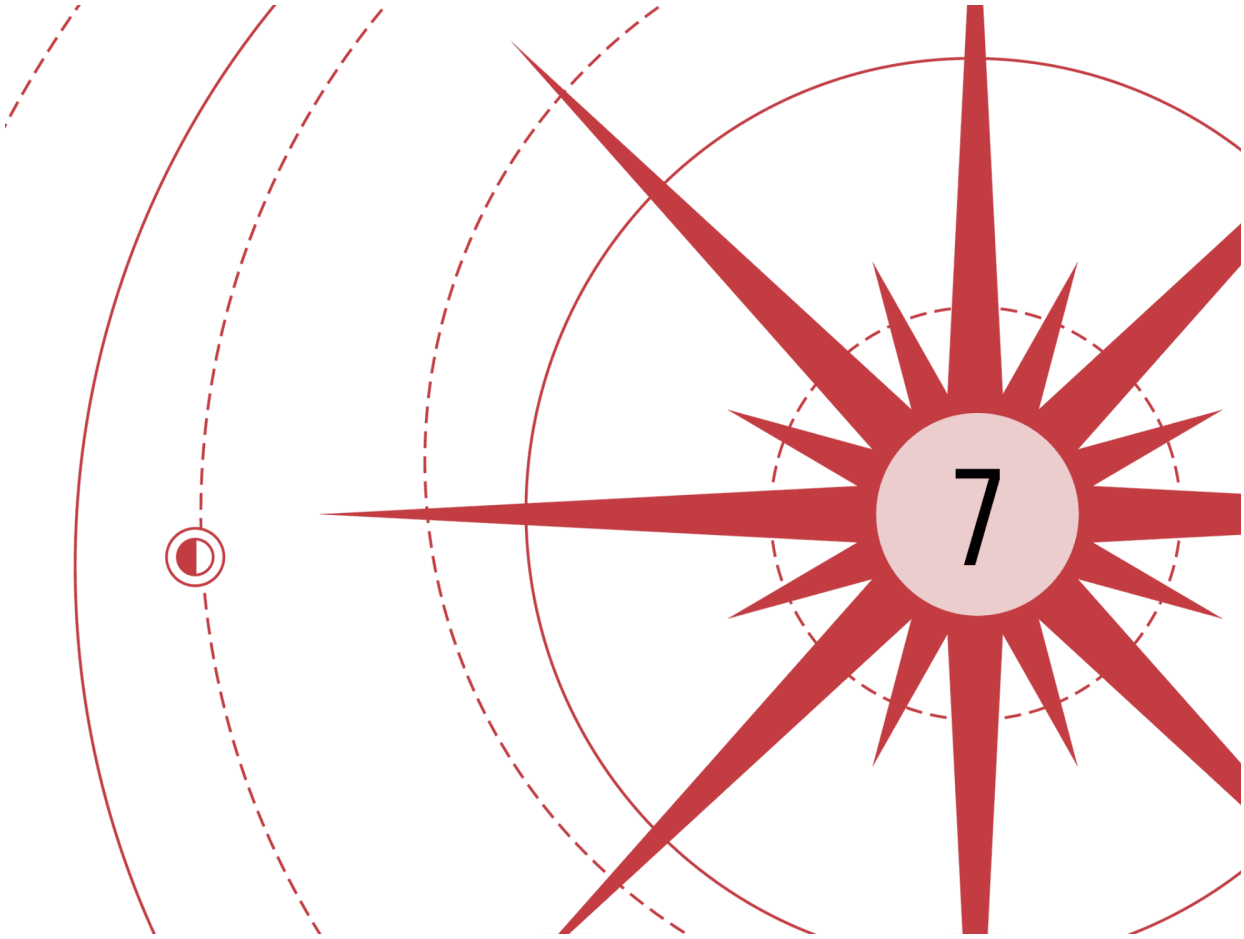
The driver said something to him, sounding frustrated.

"Yeah," he said, settling down in the seat across from hers, "I bet you're annoyed I lost a gun. Those don't seem plentiful around here. Ah, well." He sighed and shook his hand. His thumb was working fine, and the pain had faded, the scrapes on the sides of his hand healed. "Don't suppose you've got anything good to drink?"

He said this in Alethi on purpose, which wasn't his native tongue. Previous experiences had taught him not to speak in his own language, lest it slip out in the local dialect. That was how Connection worked; what

Auxiliary was doing would make his soul *think* he'd been raised on this planet, so its language came as naturally to him as his own once had. Since he generally didn't want people listening in on what he said to Auxiliary, it was better to get into the rhythm of speaking Alethi when he didn't wish to be understood.

Regardless, the driver of the hovercycle could only stare at Nomad as they passed into the darkness of this strange, oppressive cloud cover.



THE RAIN HERE wasn't nearly as bad as a storm back home. Just a quick wash of cold water. The sprinkle lasted less than a minute, though they soon passed through another one. He guessed that those omnipresent clouds made for near-constant scattered showers in this dark zone.

"This place is quite spectacular," he said to Auxiliary. "Sun constantly driving forward, vaporizing all of this." He glanced at the dash in front of him, which had a compass as one of the readings. That required him to reorient how he'd been viewing this all. "Sun rises in the west here, behind us. Chasing us, vaporizing everything in its path, superheating water in a flash. We don't dare get too far ahead, lest we reach the sunlight again. So ahead of us, in the east, the planet rotates and plunges everything into sudden darkness. I'll bet this storm here is the aftermath of that, created at sunset by sudden cooling of all that superheated water."

Indeed, the knight replies to his squire's strange rambling. It's been a long while since we've been on a planet with a persistent storm. Remind you of

home?

"In all the wrong ways," Nomad said. "The weather pattern doesn't make sense, considering the heat on the other side. I'm no meteorologist, but my gut tells me this entire planet *should* be a vortex of unlivable misery."

The hovercycle had consoles with lights to let the driver know what she was doing, so they weren't *completely* blind. But there weren't headlights on the thing, and the lack of even a token canopy or roof made him think that people didn't fly these things into the darkness often.

That made sense. This woman's force attacked a clearly more dangerous power on a rescue mission. He seemed to have joined some sort of guerrilla force—one that hid in the darkness others feared to enter. A small nation of raiders, perhaps?

But how had their people been taken in the first place? And if they were consistently doing this kind of work, why hadn't they altered their ships to fly in the rain without soaking themselves?

So he walked back his assumptions, returning to what he knew for certain, then worked forward again. Thinking methodically, logically. That part of him remained, the part that had pushed for evidence and statistics even when his friends had laughed. He was still the same person all these years later. Just as a hunk of metal was technically the same substance after being forged into an axe.

They're not raiders, he decided. *They're refugees. They were attacked by that larger group, then they went into hiding. Now they've dared strike back to rescue their friends.*

A working theory only, but it felt right. What he couldn't figure out was why they'd kidnapped an ember person. To experiment on, or perhaps…

I'm an idiot, he thought, looking at the driver and noting her dark black braid, woven with silver, resting over her shoulder. The shape of her youthful features mirrored those of the woman tied up behind them, both bearing light green eyes, of a shade that might have marked them as nobility back on his homeworld.

The ember woman was a family member. Probably an older sister, based on their relative ages. He should have seen it earlier. These people had been attacked, captives taken, and some of them had been subjected to terrible torment. The driver next to him had rescued one. Dangerous business, judging by how the ember woman continued to struggle and growl, the light from her chest glowing bloodred in the darkness.

But who was he to judge? He was just here to steal a ship, then find a power source strong enough to get him off this planet. Though first, he figured he'd let the driver feed him and give him something to drink for saving her hide.

He felt the Connection happening as they soared farther into the darkness. But the confirmation came as the woman spoke on her radio. "Beacon?" she said. "This is an outrider, requesting signal alignment."

"Rebeke?" a man's voice asked. "Rebeke Salvage, that you?"

"If it is agreeable," she said, "it is me. Code for admittance is thankfulness thirteen."

"Good to hear your voice, girl," the man replied, the words nearly lost to Nomad in the howl of the wind. "Is Divinity with you?"

Rebeke's voice caught as she replied. "No. He fell."

Silence through the line. Finally the man continued, "May his soul find its way home, Rebeke. I'm sorry."

"My brother chose this risk," she said, tears mixing with the rain on her cheeks. "As did I."

Nomad glanced toward her across the fuselage. This Rebeke looked young to him suddenly. Barely into her twenties, perhaps. Maybe it was the tears.

"Zeal," Rebeke said. "I'm…bringing someone. If it pleases you to respond with temperance, I would appreciate it."

"Someone?" the man, Zeal, said. "Rebeke…is that why you fell behind? Did you go for your sister, *explicitly* against the will and guidance of the Greater Good?"

"Yes," Rebeke whispered.

"She's dangerous! She's one of them."

"We exist because of Elegy," Rebeke snapped, voice growing stronger. "She led us. She inspired us. I couldn't leave her, Zeal. She's no danger to us as long as she remains bound. And maybe…maybe we can help her…"

"We'll talk about this when you return," Zeal replied. "Signal to Beacon has been granted. But Rebeke…this was reckless of you."

"I know." She glanced at Nomad, who was making a great show of leaning back, eyes closed, pretending he didn't understand. "I've got someone else too. A…captive?"

"You sound uncertain."

"I rescued him from the Cinder King," she said. "But something's wrong with him. He can't speak right. I think he might be slow in the head."

"Is he dangerous?"

"Maybe?" she said. "He helped Thomos, who I missed spotting in the grass. Tell his family I have him. But before that, this stranger pretended to be a killer to get me to free him, then wasn't much use in the fighting."

Not much use?

Not much *use*?

He'd brought down two enemy ships without even being able to *fight back*. He forced himself not to respond, but Damnation. Was she lying or… Well, she hadn't *seen* him back there. But she'd noticed him carrying a rifle after the other ships vanished. Where did she think he'd gotten that?

Have you noticed the names? the knight asks curiously.

"Elegy," Nomad said in Alethi. "Divinity. Zeal. Yeah, I did notice. Do you think…"

Threnodites, the knight replies, modestly confident in his wise assessment. An entire offshoot culture. Didn't expect that. Did you?

"No, but I should have," he said. "The clothing is similar. Wonder how long ago they diverged?"

Did you guess that the captive was this woman's sister?

"That I did pick out," he said, thoughtful. "Threnodites. Don't they… persist when they're killed?"

They turn into shades under the right circumstances, the hero explains to his dull-minded valet, who really should remember almost being eaten by one.

"Right," he said. "Green eyes, then red when they want to feed. Complete lack of memories. I feel like we would have seen those already. Shades come out in the darkness, and we've been in nothing *but* darkness since getting here."

Perhaps this group split off before the Shard's death—and the event's aftereffects—took them.

Nomad nodded thoughtfully. The persistent clouds of this region—without even the rings glowing in the sky to orient him—felt more pernicious now. As if he were soaring through space itself, with nothing below or above. Eternal darkness. Perhaps populated only by the spirits of the dead.

He was pleased, then, when some fires appeared up ahead—the light of blazing engines underneath a city. In this dark, rain-filled landscape with misty showers and tall black hillsides, they had to be practically upon the place before it became visible. It seemed smaller than the large city he'd left

behind, and didn't leave as much of a trail on the ground from its engines—and what it did leave probably washed away in this rain. All things considered, it was well hidden in here, even with those blazing engines.

Rebeke flew the hovercycle up to the agglomeration and locked it into place at the side of the city—the place known as Beacon, he assumed. Despite its name, it was running impressively dark. He spotted a few lights here and there, but only small ones, always soft red. The engines underneath would be masked so long as they stayed low and let the hills and rain shield them.

He didn't get a good sense of Beacon's size, though the easy way their hovercycle settled in and became just another part of its structure made him think it probably had the same architecture as the platform he'd been on before. A few people waited for them in the blowing drizzle, lit by the deep red hand-lantern carried by the lead man, who was tall, stern, and dour. Nomad pegged him immediately as the man named Zeal, the one Rebeke had spoken to on the radio.

He was surprised, then, when Zeal's voice instead came from the mouth of the very short man standing to the side. Not even four feet tall, the small man had a normal-sized head, but shorter arms and legs than your average person. His eyes were a dark brown, like Nomad's own.

"Rebeke," Zeal said. "What you've done is dangerous."

"More dangerous than Elegy's plan?" she said. "Did you recover it, Zeal?"

Instead of responding, he thoughtfully studied Nomad. "Is this the stranger? What is his name?"

"I was not graced with such information," Rebeke said. "He doesn't seem able to understand the words I speak. As if…he doesn't know *language*."

Zeal made a few motions with his hands, gesturing at his ears, then tapping his palms together. He thought maybe Nomad was deaf? A reasonable guess, Nomad supposed. No one else on this planet had tried that approach.

Nomad spoke to him in Alethi, acting confused and gesturing while he talked.

Zeal and the tall man moved to help Thomos, the gap-toothed man. The poor fellow was listing again, semiconscious and mumbling, held in his seat by only his belt. At Zeal's orders, several others rushed him off, presumably for medical attention.

"Take good care of him," Nomad said in Alethi.

“What *is* that gibberish?” the taller man said, raising his lantern. The fellow was so thin and so tall that with the lantern raised, he kind of resembled a lamppost. Especially in that long black raincoat.

“He frequently makes such noises,” Rebeke said.

“Curious,” the tall man replied.

Zeal looked toward the locked-in hovercycle, then approached slowly. The tall man joined him, as did Rebeke, all three standing and staring at the ember woman tied in the back, growling.

“Elegy,” Zeal said. “Elegy, it’s *us*.”

This provoked only more growling. Zeal sighed. “Come. We must petition to the Greater Good and supplicate them for your sake. Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually, please see to her the best you can.”

The tall man nodded.

Wait. His name was Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually? That was the best one Nomad had heard yet. He really needed to keep a list of these Threnodite names.

“Oh,” Zeal added, “and find quarters for Rebeke’s guest, if you would, Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually. Grant unto him one of the ships without local access controls, if it pleases you to do this task. He looks as if he would savor a bath and a bed.”

Zeal and Rebeke started off together down the street, and Zeal turned on a red flashlight to lead the way. A bed and a bath *did* sound good, but knowing what was going on here sounded better. So Nomad started off after them.

Naturally Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually hastened over to take his arm and gently tried to lead him away. Nomad smiled calmly, then pried his hand off and continued. When the man tried harder, Nomad yanked free more forcefully.

It was belligerent, yes. Maybe a great way to get into trouble. Perhaps they’d attack him, and he’d have an excuse to steal that hovercycle. He probably should have just done that, but…well, he was feeling charitable. So he simply marched after the other two, tailed by a nervous Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually.

Rebeke and Zeal entered a building—well, a ship with a larger structure on the deck. Nomad stepped in after them, not letting the door close. He saw it was a dimly lit small antechamber with plain flat-black walls. Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually crowded in after him.

“My greatest repentance, Zeal,” the tall man said, chagrined. “He just… won’t go with me.”

“Maybe we should present him to the Greater Good,” Rebeke said. “It could be agreeable to them to see him, and perchance they might know what manner of person he is.”

“It is agreeable to me,” Zeal replied after brief consideration. “You can trust him to us, Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually.”

“What if he’s dangerous?” the tall man whispered. “Rebeke said…he might be a killer.”

“Those bracers on his wrists,” Zeal said. “Presumably the Cinder King hasn’t yet had a chance to reset them. I think we shall be well.”

Nomad had almost forgotten the bracers he was still wearing. He managed to keep from looking down at them as they were mentioned. This all but confirmed his earlier assumption that these people had been able to disable the ember people with some kind of hack or system exploit in the bracers.

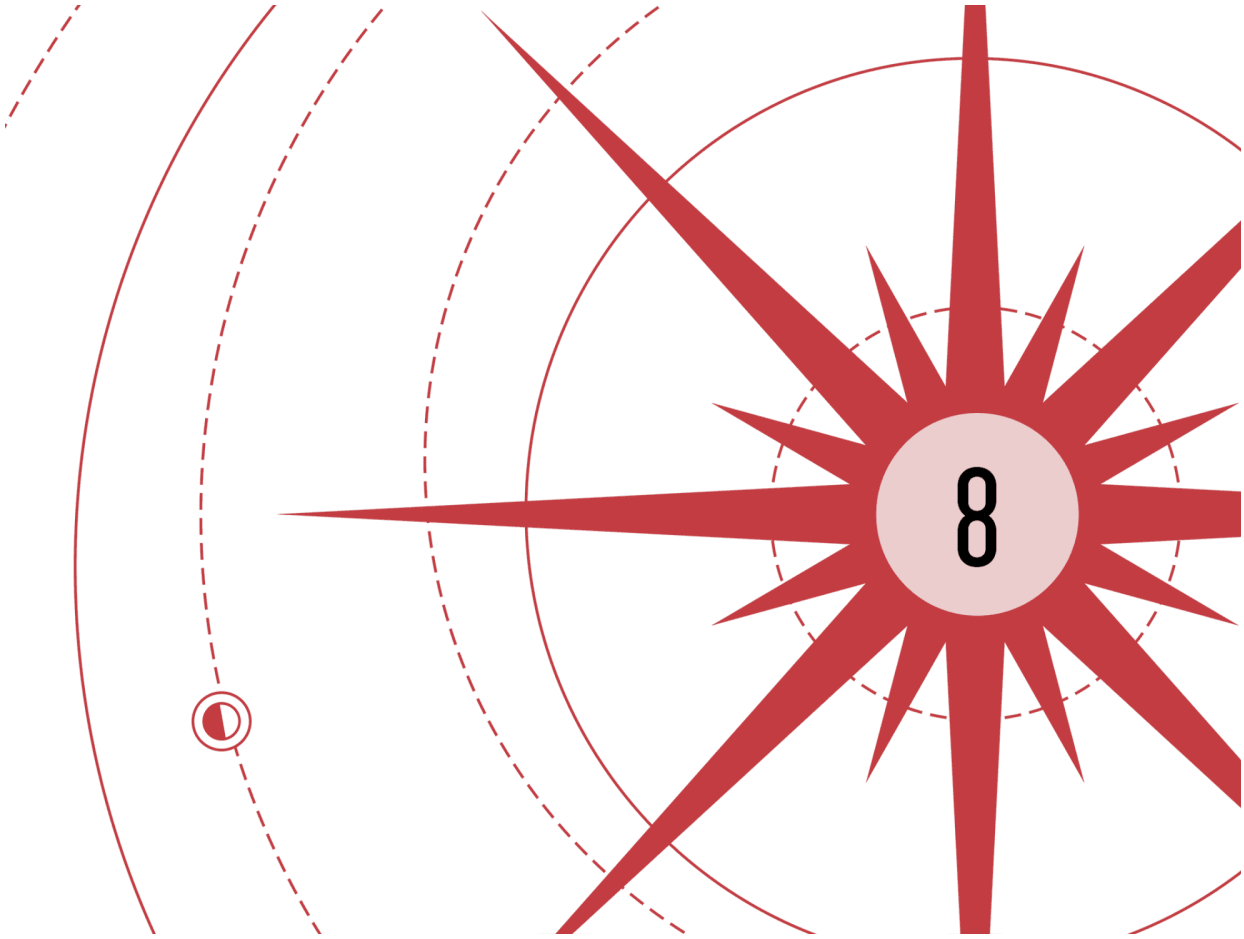
Adonalsium-Will-Remember-Our-Plight-Eventually left to deal with the chained-up woman, Elegy, and Rebeke pushed open a door at the far end of the antechamber and led them into a properly lit hallway. The contrast was briefly blinding, though the electric lights in the ceiling were set relatively low.

There were no windows, of course. That small antechamber had been a lightlock. Meant to keep people from spilling the building’s light out onto the street, allowing them to keep moving invisibly in this darkness. A quick glance showed him that the wall and door separating them from the lightlock was made of a less sturdy wooden material, while the floor and ceiling were metal. That antechamber had been added recently.

Yes, they were almost certainly a people who’d only recently gone on the run, hiding in this deeper darkness beneath the clouds.

He joined the other two in crossing the hallway, and didn’t miss that Zeal kept a close eye on him—hand in his pocket, perhaps ready to control the bracers and freeze Nomad again. They led him into a room at the end of the hallway, and he entered, eager to meet the ones they called the Greater Good.

They turned out to be three elderly women.



OLD WOMEN? THAT wasn't as exciting as he'd hoped. But, hey, maybe one was secretly a dragon.

Nomad could tell from the behavior of the others that these women were in charge, though they weren't wearing anything regal—just common black dresses, gloves like everyone else, and hats, even here indoors. The heavyset one was pale skinned, while the other two were of a more familiar, darker skin tone.

The three ladies sat at a table, taking a report from a burly man with dark brown eyes and a black beard that could have hosted a fine topiary, if it had been trimmed. Nomad had a cousin back home that looked a lot like the fellow. He had a blast mark on one arm, the jacket there burnt, exposing the glancing wound. Another member of the raiding party.

"Confidence," Rebeke said to the first and tallest of the women. She had blue eyes. "Compassion." This was the shortest of them, and the frailest in appearance, with light brown eyes. "Contemplation." This was the woman of

wider girth, the one with pale skin but black hair—obviously dyed—curled up on top of her head. Her grey-green eyes matched the shawl she wore. “I have recovered my sister,” Rebeke continued after a nod of respect to each of the three.

“So we’ve been informed,” Contemplation said, rubbing her chin. “I believe you were told not to be so brash.”

“I was.”

“And you lost your brother,” Confidence said. “One sibling sacrificed for the rescue of another?”

“We couldn’t—” Rebeke started, but the short woman they called Compassion had risen. Walking unsteadily, she stumbled over and grabbed Rebeke in a hug.

Rebeke lowered her head, stray locks of hair falling around her face, and held on.

The room fell silent. It was probably heartwarming or something. Nomad was more interested in the kettle of tea on the table. He grabbed a chair and pulled it over, then got himself a drink. He dripped water on the floor from his sodden clothing as he did so.

The tea was cold. But otherwise not bad. A little too sweet, maybe.

Everyone in the room stared at him. So he leaned back and put his boots up on the table.

The fellow with the beard pushed them off. “What type of person is this, with such terrible manners?” he demanded.

The man trailed off as Nomad stood. Again, though considered a short man in his homeland, here he had a good half a foot on anyone in the room. With his clothing ripped, they undoubtedly could see his muscles—earned, not simply a result of his Invested status.

The bearded man looked him over, then backed off, letting Nomad settle down again. He pointedly put his feet back up on the table, rattling the teacups of the three older women.

“Before we sent Thomos to the healers,” Zeal said, pulling over his own chair, “he muttered something deliriously. That he’d seen this man touch the sunlight and live.”

Thomos had seen that, had he? Nomad had almost forgotten his moment of feeling the sunlight before being yanked out of it. Perhaps the prisoners had been forced to watch the executions. Nomad’s opinion of Glowing Eyes went down even further. That was an act of distinct cruelty.

“Sunlit,” Contemplation said. “A Sunlit Man.”

“If it pleases the Greater Good, I disagree,” Rebeke said, taking her own seat at the increasingly crowded table. “Accept this observation: if he were a Sunlit One, he’d be helping us, not acting like…*this*.”

“He speaks gibberish,” Zeal said. “Like a baby not yet weaned.”

“Does he now?” Contemplation said. “Curious, curious…”

“If it pleases you, I thought perchance you’d be able to say what manner of man he was,” Rebeke said. “And honestly…he *insistently* followed us in here. We’d probably have to freeze him to get him to leave.”

“Maybe he’s a killer!” the bearded man said, leaning forward. “Our own killer! Did you see how he glared at me?”

That…was not how Nomad had expected this man to respond. The fellow was smiling, eager.

Rebeke shook her head at the bearded man. “If he were a killer, I think I’d know it, Jeffrey Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey Jeffrey? Nomad liked that one too. “Hey, Aux,” he said in Alethi. “What do you…”

Oh wait. Right. Auxiliary wasn’t around.

Everyone stared at him.

“Such odd words,” Compassion said. “I offer this thought: do you suppose he’s from a far northern corridor? They speak in ways that, on occasion, make a woman need to concentrate to understand.”

“If it pleases you to be disagreed with, Compassion,” Contemplation said, “I don’t think this is a mere accent. No, not at all. Regardless, there are more pressing matters. Zeal, may I be granted the blessing of seeing the object your team recovered?”

The short man reached into his pocket and withdrew something wrapped in a handkerchief. Outside, the wind was rising, the rain drumming more furiously on the metal ceiling and walls. The tapping on the ceiling was like nervous fingers on a bell, demanding service. All of them ignored that, however, as Zeal unwrapped a metal disc almost as wide as a man’s palm, with an odd symbol on the front. One that Nomad could read, but which he *absolutely* hadn’t expected to find on this planet. Storms.

What were Scadrians doing here?

“It’s real…” Contemplation said, resting her fingers on it, feeling the grooves in the metal.

“If it is not offensive,” Confidence said, “let me speak with bluntness. Do we *know* this is real?” The tall, elderly woman took the disc. “It could be a replica. Or the legends could be false.”

“If it is not too bold of me to say,” Zeal replied, “I offer dissent. It would not be fake. Why would the Cinder King have cause to think anyone would steal it? Few even know about his pet project.”

“This was my sister’s plan,” Rebeke said. “This is our way to freedom. Our *only* way. Zeal…you *did* it!”

Curious. Nomad was piecing things together. This hadn’t simply been a rescue operation—indeed, the rescue might have been intended to cover up a more interesting heist: the theft of this item, which he knew for a fact to be a Scadrian authorization key. Plastic key cards were, of course, eschewed by them. They had a fetish for metal.

This disc would open a door somewhere. And the people at the table seemed to know it, even if they didn’t understand completely what they were doing.

“But can we operate it?” Compassion asked. “Can we find our way in, past the ancient barrier?”

“We don’t even know if the legends are true,” Confidence said. “Yes, perhaps the Cinder King believes them. But I offer this contrast: what proof is there that these mythical lands beneath the ground exist? A place

untouched by the sun? I speak with firm conviction: I will *not* lead this people in confidence without evidence."

"Sometimes," Contemplation said, "no evidence can be found. I offer that, for a time, we must move by faith alone. Elegy—our appointed Lodestar—believed. She is the one the Greater Good trusted to guide our way in the darkness. This was her goal; that is enough for me."

"I find that offering difficult and strange from your tongue, Contemplation," Confidence said. "What of your calling, science and reason?"

Contemplation took the disc and held it reverently, her face—though aged—marked with lines of joy, her eyes dancing and aglow with the fire of new knowledge. Her dyed black hair might have been seen by some as vanity, but Nomad recognized it as a token of self-possession. She knew how she liked to look. And she didn't care that others knew it was artificial. In expressing herself, the artificial became more authentic than the original.

"Even in science," Contemplation said, "faith plays a role. Each experiment done, each step on the path of knowledge, is achieved by striking out into the darkness. You can't know what you will find, or that you will find anything at all. It is faith that drives us—faith in answers that must exist."

She looked to the others in the room, skipping Nomad, but including Rebeke, Zeal, and Jeffrey Jeffrey. The respect she showed them proved that the leaders were not uniquely important in this society; everyone mattered.

"It is a wild hope, these stories of a land untouched by the sun," Contemplation admitted. "But we must ask ourselves. How long will we survive in this darkness? Elegy was right to move us here, but it was an act of desperation. And even now, our people wilt. We cannot grow food. We lose more ships and laborers every time we venture into the dawnlands.

"I offer this grim truth: we will die out here. Yet undoubtedly if we return to our previous corridor, we will be consumed by the Cinder King. We haven't the knowledge of warfare and killing to fight him; we have not been graced with such brutal and carnal instincts.

"I offer a further grim insight: he will never again be taken by surprise as he was today. His killers will stand alert, prepared in wisdom against further hostility. The Cinder King will ne'er again allow a clever hack of their bracers, and his people will ne'er again let themselves become so distracted by their games that they slacken their guard.

“Today was our greatest victory as the people of Beacon. But I offer, in contrast to that peak, that today is the day we begin to fade. Without a solution, we will die. And so I ask: Confidence, is a little faith—a little time spent chasing a legendary reward—not worth the chance that we can avoid our fate?” She turned the disc over. “We trusted Elegy to get us here. We should trust her again and find this Refuge.”

“We should, by duty of our current accomplishments, test this key,” Compassion said. “And Zeal’s team should be commended for their willingness to steal it for us.”

“I offer this reminder:” Confidence warned, “the Cinder King will chase us for that token.”

“If it pleases you to be contradicted,” Compassion said softly, “he would chase us anyway. He desires greatly to destroy us. And that sense of purpose will have been bolstered by today’s events. He *must* destroy us now, lest more of his people question how far his authority extends.”

Nomad listened with interest to the exchange. Yes, they understood what that key was. But they didn’t know the truth of what they’d find by using it. He was confident that even if they did open a door somewhere with the key…it would not give them some mythical “refuge.” That was a modern device, borne by Scadrian surveyors, to let them be located and give them authorization to return to one of their small, exploratory starships.

The conversation moved on as the winds raged even harder, rocking the city. They mentioned a “great maelstrom,” which he understood as a storm, not unlike a highstorm, that followed the sun at dusk. So he’d guessed right—this cloud cover was the aftermath of sunset, and right *at* sunset was some kind of terrible storm.

He imagined the place as a planet with five phases. First: the lands he’d passed, where reflected sunlight grew plants. Second: the constant cloud cover, where rain was scattered. Third: the maelstrom at sunset, where sunlight vanished, leaving a cyclone born of pressure and humidity changes. Fourth: the superheated landscape where the sun reigned. Finally dawn, where men and women were left to die.

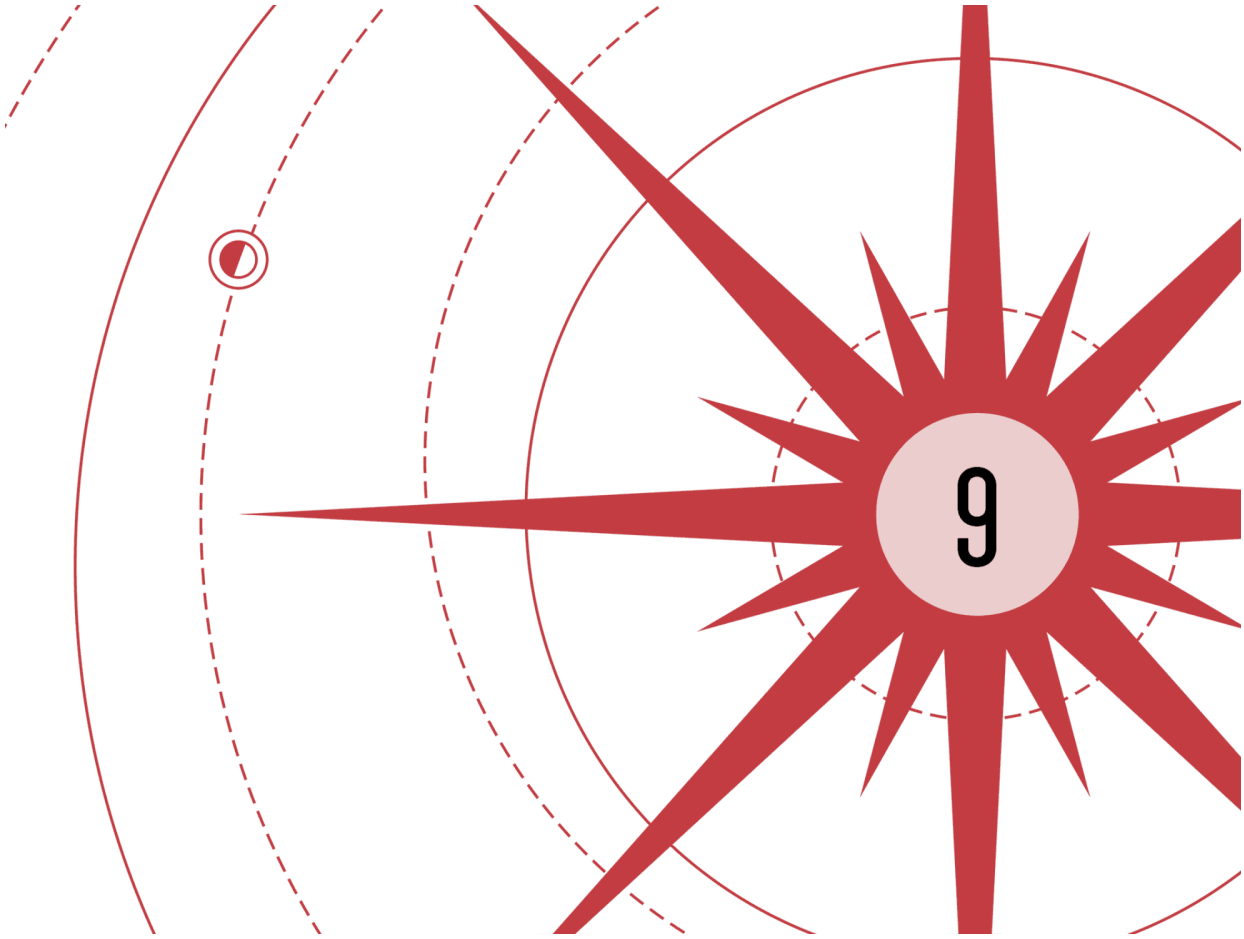
How odd to have found a land where instead of being chased by a storm, the people snuck up on its tail and hid within the edges of its cloak.

Regardless, Nomad’s earlier rudeness—his barbarity in shoving his way into this room—suddenly seemed shameful. Yes, he had moved on from the man he’d once been, overly concerned with propriety and order. He knew that, like a teen leaving home for the first time, he often went too far in

trying to prove himself. He still rebelled against the man he'd been and, in his selfishness, had become a man who could blunder about like a blind chull.

Nomad moved his boots off the table, feeling a loathing for himself that—remarkably—even *he* couldn't blame on his circumstances. Not this time. He stood up and—surprising the people in the room—strode to the door and pushed his way out. Through the hallway, through the lightlock.

Into the storm.



WALKING INTO A STORM wasn't something usually done on Nomad's homeworld. Yet he'd traveled the cosmere enough by now to know that even a violent storm on other planets was nothing compared to those of Roshar.

Indeed, the wind buffeted him here, but it did not lift him from his feet. The rain pelted him, but did not threaten to scour away his skin. Lightning flashed in the sky, but did not strike so often and so near that its deadly touch seemed inevitable. He did wish he had something more than these ragged clothes, stolen from the cavern planet where he'd been last. They did little to keep off the chill. But then again, most of the cold he felt now came from within.

He started down the miserable street, the metal slick beneath his boots. At least his boots were holding up. He'd learned long ago during his travels: skimp on shirts if you must, but never on footwear. He made his way vaguely toward the edge of the city, though he had to go slowly, waiting for lightning to illuminate the path.

The dim lights he'd seen earlier had vanished. People were inside, locked up, hunkered down against the rain. *That* was universal. Whether on a planet where the rainfall could dent metal plates, or on one where it barely left you damp, people fled a storm. Perhaps they disliked the reminder that no matter how lofty their cities, they were mere motes in the grand expanse of planetary weather patterns.

He'd come out here hoping he'd feel better in the rain. Hoping that its pelting would feel like the embrace of an old friend—that the wind's howl would sound like the chatter of men having stew at a fireside. But today those memories came harshly into his mind. The winds made him remember who he had been: a man who would have died before treating people as he'd done today.

No, the storm did not offer him refuge. As much as he liked the rain—as much as it felt *right* to him—the memories were too painful.

He finally arrived back at the place where they'd left the hovercycle attached to the city's side, lending its thrust to the rest. Bold, to keep this place in the air during a literal thunderstorm. Still, the air didn't seem as electric as it might have in another storm—there were long stretches between lightning strikes.

By the cloud glow, he saw that the ember woman had been removed from her bonds in the back seat. And the cycle had been cleverly altered, panels placed above each seat, protecting the leather cushions from the elements and making the cycle fit in to the surface of the city. With the windshields folded down and the panels in place, the oversized hovercycle resembled a thick rectangle of steel bolted to the edge of Beacon. Like how a multitool might look like a box before the implements were folded out.

That made him worry as he crawled to the edge of the cycle—careful not to be swept off into the darkness by the wind. Here, he reached down to the very bottom of the vehicle. To his relief, the rifle he'd stowed there still waited for him. Masked by a stumble to convince Rebeke that he was clumsy, he'd feigned an accidental drop—then used Auxiliary as a specialized claw to latch it into place beneath the hovercycle.

The mechanism he'd formed from Auxiliary to hold the gun in place vanished. He raised the rifle, hand slick with rainwater.

And so, the knight says dramatically, his clever plan is fully executed. And for some reason, his dull-minded squire is now armed with a weapon he can't fire.

"They'd have disarmed me when we arrived," he said.

And again…such a clever plan…to get a weapon that one can't use. All it took was stranding me alone in the rain, to be soaked all the way through—then doing the same to yourself by the looks of you.

"I needed a shower anyway," Nomad said, wiping the water from his face, then running his fingers through the stubble on his head. His hair had been burned away in the flash of sunlight. *Sunlit Man.* He shook his hand, still kneeling on the hovercycle, feeling at the panels covering the seats of the cycle. Could he get these off?

Did he want to?

The lightning flashes left afterimages in his mind of a man he'd once been. A man that, in all honesty, he didn't *want* to go back to being. Naive. Overly concerned with rules and numbers. Locked down by responsibility in a way that had slowly constricted him with anxiety, like barbed wire on his soul.

He didn't like who he'd become. But he didn't miss who he'd been either—not really. He'd lived, grown, fallen, and…well, changed.

There had to be a third option. A way not to put his former life on a pedestal, but *also* not to be a personified piece of garbage.

What if he did climb onto this cycle and vanish into the darkness? What would that get him? Here he had people who seemed—in a small way—willing to trust him and let him in. Maybe because they were desperate. Probably because he hadn't given them much choice.

Beyond that, though, he got the sense that they weren't practiced in fighting or killing. Yes, they'd pulled off a daring rescue and an even more daring thievery. For that, he commended them. But he'd seen the panicked way the captives had responded to the ember people—mirrored in the way that everyone treated him. This was not a group accustomed to violence.

In many places, a struggle for survival brought out people's most brutal aspects. Yet among this group, he saw something remarkable. Was it possible that being forced to always move—being forced to work together for survival—had forged them into a society that didn't have *time* to kill one another? That perhaps this planet had created people who weren't weak—that sun surely would not abide weakness—but who also valued life?

If he wanted a power source strong enough to get him offworld, he would need allies. And he had a feeling that going to the Cinder King for help would not turn out well.

He stepped back from the cycle, resting the rifle on his shoulder. Then he felt something. A tugging on his insides. A kind of…strange warmth. The

storm seemed to slacken, the rain falling off.

Damnation. It wasn't possible. Not here on this world. This was a common storm, not the mythical tempest of his homeland. Things didn't happen in the darkness of common storms like they did there…

Hey, the knight asks confusedly, what are we doing? Nomad? What's our next step?

He saw a light to his left. Farther along the rim of the city. Drawn to it, like a weary traveler drawn to a fragrant cookfire, he started walking. That… was a person standing there, wasn't it? Holding something that glowed in his fingers, a sphere. Wearing a uniform, facing away from Nomad, looking out through the darkness.

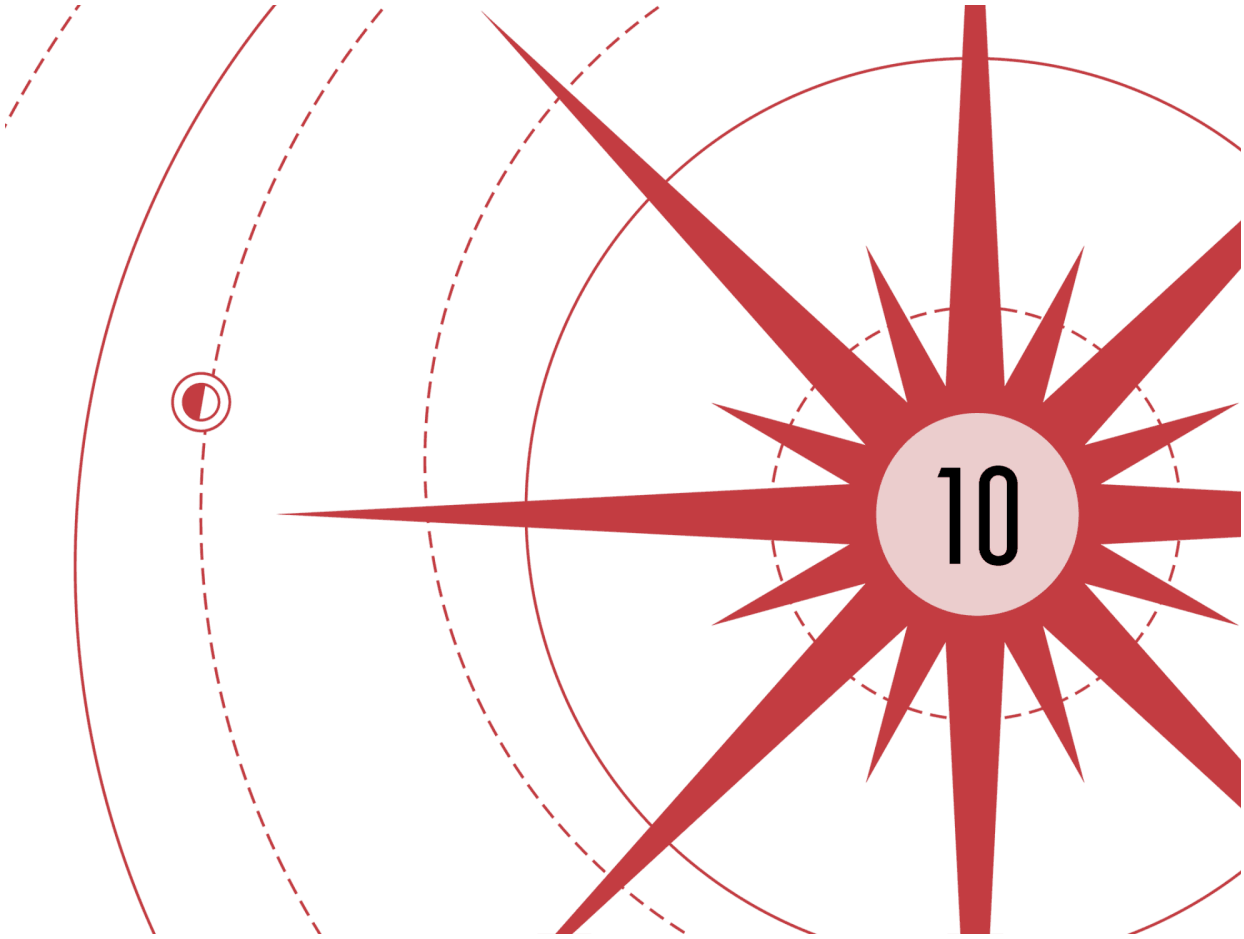
Storms. It couldn't be. *It couldn't.*

Ignoring Auxiliary's second prompting for an explanation, Nomad walked forward. Haunted by what he might find. Worried that he was going mad. Yet desperate to know. Could it…

"Kal?" he asked into the storm.

The figure turned, revealing a hawkish face and an eminently punchable grin.

"Aw, Damnation," Nomad said with a sigh. "Wit? What the hell are *you* doing here?"



"WHAT?" WIT SAID, dusting off his blue uniform—which was untouched by the rain. "A master can't check in on his favorite student now and then?"

He glowed softly, visible even in the darkness, and his substance rippled at the rain's interference. Like he was a reflection on a puddle. This was an illusion, but why now? How had he…

"Auxiliary?" Nomad demanded. "Did you reinforce my Connection to Wit when you were playing with my soul earlier?"

Since I am dead, the knight replies with a huff, I don't really have to care if you're angry at me or not.

Oh, storms. That's what had happened. Now that they had the proper threshold for it, Auxiliary had reached through the distance and let Wit Connect to Nomad.

"So," Wit said, looking him up and down, "that's a…curious outfit."

"It's what you get," Nomad said, "when your clothing gets set on fire by the sunlight, then you are dragged behind a speeding hovercycle for a half

hour.”

“Chic,” Wit said.

“I don’t have time for you, Wit,” Nomad said. “The Night Brigade is out there. Hunting me. Because of what *you* did to me.”

“You may have saved the cosmere.”

“I absolutely did *not* save the cosmere,” Nomad snapped, finding a pebble in his pocket and throwing it through Wit’s head. The image rippled and then restored. “I might have saved *you* though.”

“Same difference.”

“It’s not,” Nomad said. “It’s really not.” He stepped closer to Wit’s projection. “If they catch me, they’ll be able to connect the Dawnshard to you. And then they’ll be on *your* tail.”

Wit didn’t respond. He clasped his hands behind his back and stood up straight, a trick he’d taught Nomad years ago to convince an audience you were thinking about something very important.

“You’ve had a hard time of it lately,” Wit said, “haven’t you, apprentice?”

“I’m *not* your apprentice,” Nomad said. “And don’t pretend to care now. You didn’t do anything when my friends and I were dying to arrows all those years ago. I went to Damnation then, and you sat around playing a flute. Don’t you *dare* presume to imply you *care about me* now! I’m just another tool to you.”

“I never did get a chance to apologize for…events in Alethkar.”

“Well, it’s not like you had the opportunity to,” Nomad said. “After frequently talking to my superior officer, asking him to pass messages to me. After living together in the same city for years and never stopping by. You left me to rot. And it ate you away from the inside, didn’t it? Not because you care. But because someone knew what you really were, then had the audacity not to die and simplify your life.”

Wit actually looked down at those words. Huh. It wasn’t often that one could stab him with a knife that hurt. Took familiarity. And truth. Two things Wit was far too good at avoiding.

“There was a boy, once,” Wit began, “who looked at the stars and wondered if—”

Nomad deliberately turned and walked away. He’d heard far, far too many of this man’s stories to care for another.

“I was that boy,” Wit said from behind. “When I was young. On Yolen. Before this all began—before God died and worlds started ending. I…I was that boy.”

Nomad froze, then glanced over his shoulder. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but droplets of it still interrupted Wit's figure.

He didn't often speak of his past. Of…those days long ago. He claimed to not remember much about his childhood—a time spent in a land of dragons and bone-white trees.

"Are you lying?" Nomad called to him. "Is this a fabrication? The perfect hook designed to reel me in?"

"No lies, not right now," Wit said, gazing up at the sky. "I can remember…sitting on a rooftop. Looking up and wondering what the stars were.

"I assumed I'd never know. The town philosophers had talked themselves hoarse arguing the matter, as was often their way. Talk until you can't talk anymore, and then hope someone will buy you a drink to keep the words flowing." He smiled at Nomad, eyes twinkling. "Yet here I am. Millennia later. Walking between the stars, learning each one. I got my answers eventually. Yet…I'd guess that, by now, you've seen more of the cosmere than I have."

"So it's a blessing?" Nomad asked, gesturing to himself. "This Torment you've given me?"

"Every Torment is," Wit said, "even mine."

"Wonderful. Very comforting. Thanks for the chat, Wit." Nomad continued on his way. As he walked, he found Wit appearing farther along the rim in front of him, turning to watch him pass.

"You always wanted the answers," Wit said. "That's why I took you on. You thought you could find them, tease them out, write them down, and catalogue the world. So certain you could find every one, if you just tried hard enough…"

"Yes, I was an idiot, thank you. Appreciate the reminder."

Wit, of course, appeared ahead of him again—though he was fading, his form becoming transparent. The little burst of Connection Auxiliary had used to make this meeting happen was running out, blessedly.

"It's a good instinct," Wit said, "to search for answers. To want them."

"They don't exist," Nomad said with a sigh, stopping to look at Wit. "There are too many questions. Seeking any kind of explanation is madness."

"You're right on the first point," Wit said. "Remarkable to think that I discovered the secret to the stars themselves. But then found questions abounding that were even more pernicious. Questions that, yes, have no

answers. No good ones, anyway." He met Nomad's eyes. "But realizing that changed me, apprentice. It's not—"

"It's not the answers but the questions themselves," Nomad interrupted. "Yes, blah blah. I've heard it. Do you know how many times I've heard it?"

"Do you understand it?"

"Thought I did," he said. "Then my oaths ended, and I realized that destinations really *are* important, Wit. They are. No matter what we say."

"Nobody *ever* implied they lacked importance," Wit said. "And I don't think you do understand. Because if you did, you'd realize: sometimes, asking the questions is enough. Because it has to be enough. Because sometimes, that's all there is."

Nomad held his gaze. Fuming for reasons he couldn't explain. Exasperated, though of course that part was normal when Wit was involved.

"I'm not going back," Nomad said, "to who I was. I don't *want* to go back. I'm not running from him. I don't *care* about him."

"I know," Wit said softly. Then he leaned in. "I was wrong. I did the best with the situation I had, hoping it would prevent calamity. I ruined your life, and I was wrong. I'm sorry."

How…odd it was to hear him be so forthright, so frank. Sincere. Completely sincere. Storm that man, how did he keep surprising Nomad, even after all this time?

Nomad turned to go, but then stopped, waiting for the final word. Wit *always* had the final word. This time, though, the man just gave Nomad a wan, sorrowful smile, then faded to nothing. Perhaps he knew there was nothing more of any use he could say, and so had fallen silent. If so, it was probably the first time *that* had happened in Wit's life.

Nomad sighed. He expected a wisecrack from Auxiliary, but the spren stayed silent as well. He usually did when Wit was around—he knew Nomad often felt double-teamed in situations like that.

"Damnation," Nomad said, "we need to get off this planet. And I know how we can do it."

How? the knight asks, wondering if his squire has missed the entire point of an important conversation.

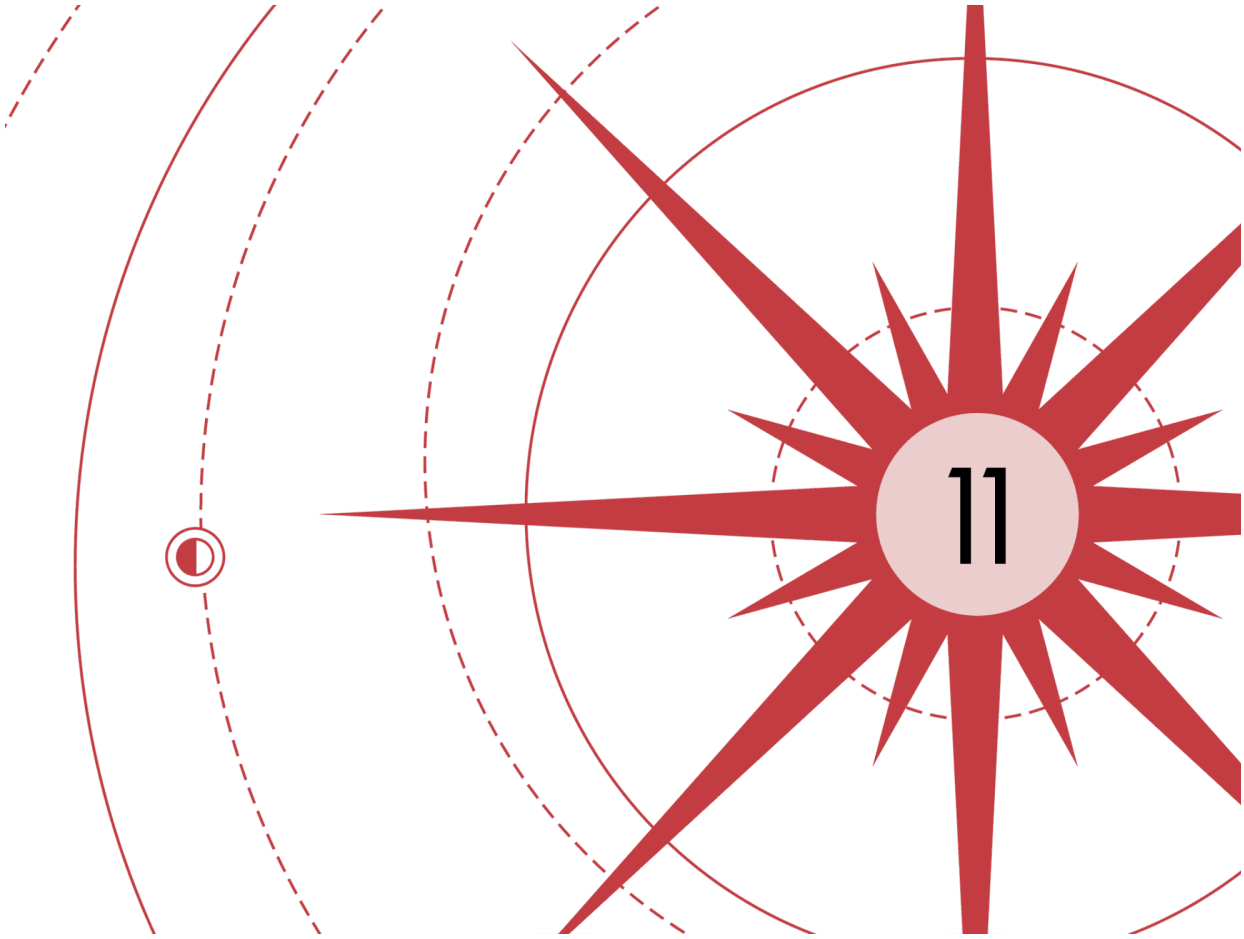
"The people running this place found an access disc that looks very familiar. Scadrian writing on it. And you can bet if there's a power source on this planet powerful enough to get me offworld, it will be with them."

Ahhh… Auxiliary said. *So what do we do?*

Nomad stalked to the building he'd left behind, picking it out easily because he'd left the doors cracked open by accident. He stomped inside, trailing water, rifle under his arm. He burst in on the people still in conference, his arrival causing them to stumble back in surprise and fear. Not a single one reached for a weapon.

Yeah, they were doomed. But maybe their desires aligned with his. He grabbed the access disc off the table, held it up, and spoke in their tongue—perfectly, without accent.

"I know what this is," he said. "It's a key to a large metal door, probably buried somewhere, right? With similar writing on it?" He tossed the key onto the table, where it hit and flipped, clattering against the wood. "I'm going there too. Maybe we can help each other."



CONTEMPLATION THREW HERSELF to her feet, pointing. "I knew it! I knew it! Your features, that gibberish you spoke. You're too odd to be from another corridor. You're one of *them*. A Sunlit Man."

"A legend," Confidence said, folding her bony arms.

"So is our exodus from Hell," Contemplation said. "Both so far back in time, even the Chorus doesn't remember the dates."

"Someone want to tell me what a Sunlit Man is?" Nomad said, frowning. He kept his eyes on Zeal, the one person in the room who had not jumped at his entrance. The short man had his hand in his pocket, presumably on the device that could freeze Nomad in place.

"Accept this explanation," Compassion said with her small, frail voice. "Long ago, a people existed who could live in the sunlight. People who could take it into themselves, rather than being destroyed by it. People who could use it. They were able to *stay* in one place long enough to build a city

beneath the ground. These are the Sunlit Ones—those who could survive the light."

"I was touched by that sunlight, yes," Nomad said. "But it nearly destroyed me."

"You touched sunlight and were not instantly killed?" Jeffrey Jeffrey whispered, looking to Nomad with eyes wide. "It's true?"

"For a few seconds only!" Nomad said.

"Sunlit," Compassion whispered.

"With all respect and mindfulness," Confidence said, "I find this entire story to be a notion for children, not a fact for adults. If these people went under the ground, mud would suffocate them."

"No," Contemplation said. "There are places where the ground is all stone. There could be holes in it, like lava tubes. Places where people live. I've always felt I would see one, before my time arrived."

"Stone melts in the sunlight," Zeal said.

"The stones of the Sunlit People don't," Contemplation continued. "They are deep. The Cinder King believes this; that's why he's spent years trying to find a way through that door. And this man here, he came from the Refuge of Stone!"

"Yeah, you're wrong," Nomad said. He'd expected outcries when he'd come barging in, maybe a fight. Not…whatever this was. "But I don't particularly care what you believe. Do you know where this door is? The one the disc opens?"

"We have some idea," Compassion said softly. The smallest and oldest of the women considered him, then smiled. "It was the plan of Elegy, our Lodestar. To steal the Cinder King's key and figure out how to use it, gaining entrance to the hidden lands of peace beneath the ground."

"The only way we can escape him," Zeal said with a grunt. "He's the most powerful man in the world now. He controls the corridor at the equator, with the most resources. He forces everyone else to the bands closer and closer to the poles, where even a stumble leads to death…"

Nomad filed that information away. "Well, I want to find that door too. I'll help you get there."

And are you going to tell them? the hero asks sharply, voice laden with implication. Are you going to warn them what they'll find inside? Not a refuge for outsiders, but a small alien installation, likely here to monitor the Investiture that sun is emitting?

“Not our problem,” Nomad said in Alethi. “These people want to find that door. I want to find that door. I’ll help them get there. That’s where our responsibility to them ends.”

Callous.

Auxiliary didn’t push him further, though. He knew as well as Nomad did that their best chance to get off this planet was to get into that installation.

“I find this man intriguing,” Zeal said. “Shall we accept his offer? Perhaps he can help.”

“What can you do for us, stranger?” Confidence asked. “What aid do you offer?”

“For one thing, I can read that,” he said, pointing at the disc. “It belonged to a person named Haridan, a lieutenant. It’s his authorization badge, letting him open the door. I’ll be able to read what is on the door too, and if there are people inside, I can communicate with them.”

“Sunlit,” Contemplation whispered.

The others nodded.

“I offer my opinion that we should take his help,” Zeal said. “We must find this place and escape into it! Would it not be pleasing to us and all our people to pray for the safety of the poor Cinder King as we lock him and his minions outside the very door they’ve spent years trying to enter?”

“Adonalsium will bless us in this endeavor, I feel certain,” Compassion said. “It could lead at last to real rest for our people. No more relying on sunhearts to power our cities. No more outrunning the sunrise. No more… loss.”

“Adonalsium, eh?” Nomad said. “By the way, how’d a bunch of Threnodites end up worshipping the father god of an entirely different planet?”

“We learned before our exodus,” Confidence said. “We were those who believed the words of the first Lodestar. We lived in Hell itself and were led by our faith to a new land.”

“One that’s perpetually on fire?” Nomad asked.

“Adonalsium,” Contemplation said, “*will* remember our plight eventually…”

The cynical squire wisely chooses not *to explain to these people the sad reality of their god’s demise some ten thousand years before. Hint hint.*

Nomad held his tongue.

“Perhaps Adonalsium *has* remembered us,” Zeal said. “Maybe that is why the Sunlit Man is here.”

“Call me Nomad, if you have to call me anything,” he interjected.

They barely seemed to notice. “If he can get us past the doorway…” Jeffrey Jeffrey said, then looked to him. “Can you activate this disc? Open the door? The Cinder King has tried for years and has never managed it. He can find the door, but not pass inside.”

Could he? “I’m almost one hundred percent confident I can get that door open,” Nomad said. “I’m not from the place beyond, like you think, but…I do know the people inside. Some of their kind, at least. I speak their language.”

Contemplation met his eyes. She understood, as the others didn’t seem to, about other languages. She believed. Gazing into those aged eyes, so full of hope, he found himself slipping. His ancient self reasserting just a little.

“Look,” he said to her, “I…don’t think you’ll find what you want beyond that door. It’s…not a refuge, like you want it to be.”

“Do you know that?” she asked. “For certain?”

“No,” he admitted. There *might* be a large installation there. Storms, it could even be abandoned. That seemed very improbable. Most likely it was a survey ship, full of researchers investigating that sunlight. Such ships were tiny. Barely enough room for a complement of two dozen scientists.

“No,” he repeated, “I don’t know for certain. But…I have a lot of experience with this. I don’t think that key will bring you salvation.”

The group shared glances.

“We need to try anyway, don’t we?” Confidence said. Words he was surprised to hear from her, considering her objections earlier. “This really is our only hope?”

“We have dwindling power,” Jeffrey Jeffrey said. “And the Cinder King is enraged. No, we will not live much longer. This *is* our only hope.”

The others nodded. Storms. Well, Nomad had tried. He had spoken up. That was enough.

He’d do his part. Get them to the doorway, then open it for them. After that…well, they were on their own. And he would bear no guilt. It wasn’t his fault they were determined to pin their hopes on an impossibility.

“We must ask the people before we commit for certain,” Compassion said softly. “If it pleases the others, I request this course.”

“I agree with that, in wisdom,” Contemplation said. “There are no tyrants in Beacon, only family. We will bring this to the people and let them decide if we should risk the possible reward of entering the Refuge or if we should

instead surrender to the Cinder King. I suspect the presence of this stranger will help them choose the former."

"Great," Nomad said. "I need something to eat that isn't mud. Something to drink that isn't raining on me. Something to wear that isn't hanging in shreds. Consider that my fee for translating that disc for you."

"And do you have a fee for helping us get to the door?" Rebeke asked.

"I just want into that Refuge," Nomad said. "Also, I'll want these bracers off my arms."

"We don't have the keys to—" Zeal started.

Nomad glared at him. "You hacked the Cinder King's system and knocked out his ember people—"

"They're called the Charred," Rebeke said.

"—whatever they are, you knocked them all out at once. You absolutely can take these off me."

Zeal looked away.

"We have yet to discuss," Confidence said, "how you feigned the inability to speak merely to spy upon our workings."

"Can't be too careful," Nomad said, "when you meet someone new. Eh, Rebeke?"

She glared at him.

He smiled and winked. Then he held out his arms. "So how do I get them off?"

"I'll fetch the attuner," Zeal said with a sigh. "With your blessing, Greater Good."

The three women nodded. He slipped out, leaving Nomad to settle down in a seat at the table. He tipped his chair back against the wall, but didn't put his feet up this time. He was, after all, feeling far more respectful.

"If it is agreeable, Nomad," Confidence said to him, "I should like to inquire regarding the spirit that accompanies you. Rebeke tells us you can materialize objects at will?"

"That's one way of putting it," he replied. "But the way I do it is my own secret. Sorry."

They let it drop, which he found surprising. How did they know that Auxiliary was a spirit? And why didn't they push harder? One thing he'd noticed everywhere his travels took him was the universal fascination with Auxiliary. People often treated his abilities as a sign of divinity, or at least of extreme favor with divinities.

Here, they simply let him brush them off with a single sentence? How odd. They turned to other topics, discussing how they'd gather the people and how to find the entrance to the facility—the Refuge of Stone, as they called it. Apparently it wasn't easy to locate.

Rebeke didn't join the conversation; she turned to getting the others more tea. Curious. Outside, when they'd been running for their lives, she'd seemed a desperate rebel. Now he saw her differently. A young woman in a wet dress, her hat lost in the fighting. She was splattered with mud the rain hadn't washed off, her shoulders drooping, her posture slumped. She had been through a lot today.

What kept her here when she should have, quite justifiably, headed for her bed, or at least a change of clothing? Perhaps it had something to do with her sister. Hadn't they said that the woman—now transformed into one of those Charred—founded this city and came up with their plan to escape into the Refuge? Where did that leave Rebeke?

Her brother died today, he remembered. *She watched his head get vaporized while rescuing their sister.* Yeah, that dull expression, those rote motions. Rebeke was in shock. He knew what that was like. Carrying on by sheer force of will, trying to keep busy. Because if you stopped, if you *did* go to bed, you knew what would happen.

You'd have to face it.

"So, Aux," Nomad said in Alethi as they waited. "Are we going to talk about how you went against my explicit orders and contacted Wit?"

The knight shuffles uncomfortably beneath his squire's pointed question, Aux said. *He tries to reply with confidence, but the nervousness in his voice betrays him.*

"What did you hope would happen?" Nomad asked. "Did you think Wit would sweep in here, prop me up with one of his little morality tales, and I'd just go back to whistling?"

I remember…revelations in light. Transformation.

"Those were rare days," Nomad said, shifting his gun against his shoulder. "Most change doesn't happen with a revelation in light, Aux. Most change happens as a slow, steady slide toward the pit. Like how we age, step by shuffling step toward the grave."

You don't age anymore.

"My body might not," he whispered, "but my soul sure does. It's been rounding that pit for years. Step by step, Aux. We wear away. Ideals are like

statues in the wind. They seem so permanent, but truth is, erosion happens subtly, constantly."

The others continued to confer. "This will be dangerous, Greater Good," Jeffrey Jeffrey was saying. "I offer this as fact: we will have to disassemble the entire city and bring it along, to be ready once the prospectors locate the entrance."

"We will make this clear to the people in our explanations," Compassion said. "Thank you, Jeffrey Jeffrey, for your frank assessment. But this *is* where our hopes must rest. Contemplation is correct. We cannot survive as we are. Our sunhearts die, and our resources dwindle."

"Either we must access this Refuge," Contemplation said, "or we must die by the Cinder King's brutality. He will not accept our surrender, and the people will know that."

"Imagine," Compassion said, "a place beyond his influence. A place where we can prove that our way is better, that we do not require his tyranny or false 'unity' to survive. If Zeal's mission had failed, we would perhaps have to accept worse options. But with that key, we have a chance."

Confidence, tall and intense, turned away from the table. "Which provokes my memory. We have not yet discussed a punishment appropriate for the one who disobeyed our strict commands and in so doing, cleaved unto chaos and jeopardy, sowing both to all who accompanied her."

Rebeke, who had been quietly cleaning up the hotplate and teacups, stiffened. She looked back at the table, then cast her eyes down.

"Hey," Nomad said in their tongue, "maybe give the girl a break. Without her, you wouldn't have me."

"This is not your concern, outsider," Confidence said.

"If you haven't noticed," Nomad said, "I don't really care what you think is or is not my concern." He stood up as Zeal returned, bearing some equipment. Nomad placed his gun on the table, then held out his hands.

Zeal looked to the Greater Good—who nodded their approval—before beginning work on the bracers.

"You keep saying," Nomad continued, "that you're different from the Cinder King. That you resist his tyranny. It seems to me that if you're trying to establish a place different from the one that guy rules, you'd want to avoid punishing a person who is just doing their best to help."

The first bracer came off. Zeal set it on the table with a thump, then moved underneath the other one, working.

“Thank you for the lecture, young man,” Confidence said dryly. “Perhaps, with age, you will come to realize that a *balance* is needed. Tyranny is awful, but not all authority is to be rejected. It is common for the young to have trouble with this concept of moderation.”

“How old do you think I am?” Nomad said, amused.

“Older teens?” Confidence said.

“No, older,” Contemplation replied. “Young twenties.”

Storms. He knew that he looked a *lot* younger with the grey no longer appearing in his hair, but young twenties? He’d been thirty-eight when time had finally stopped tracking him, his soul bending under the Dawnshard’s influence—and that was by his planet’s accounting, which had longer years than most.

Granted, he might have had trouble guessing their ages, living perpetually in darkness. But still.

“I’ve experienced much more of life than you’d expect from my appearance,” Nomad said. “And I’ve seen a great deal of tyranny in the name of, to be blunt, what people called ‘the greater good.’ Names are irrelevant. You want to avoid being considered tyrants? Act like it.”

The other bracer came off. Nomad nodded his thanks to Zeal, who backed away, eyeing him—as if worried he’d grab the rifle immediately and start shooting. A part of Nomad wanted to do just that: fire a few rounds into the ceiling, if only to give these people the shock of their lives. Shake them up. Auxiliary would chew him out, though.

Instead he just shouldered his rifle. “Food. Clothing. Bed. That order.”

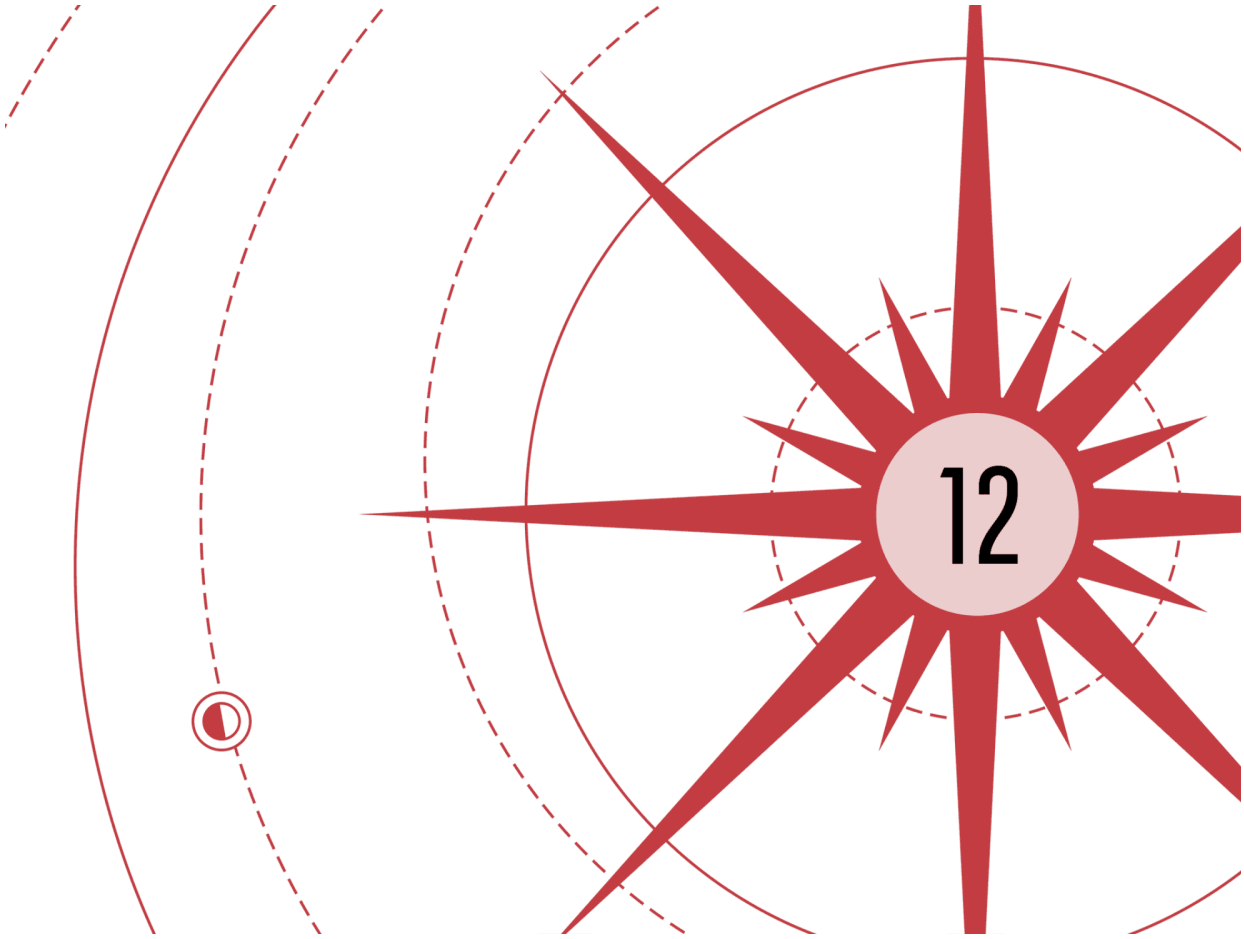
“Rebeke can fulfill that assignment,” Compassion said. “As part of her punishment.”

“Can you fly, outsider?” Contemplation asked.

Nomad froze. He looked to the three of them, his mind racing, emotions surging…until he realized they meant fly a ship.

“I could probably figure it out,” he said, “with a little instruction on the controls. I’ve flown similar craft. Why?”

“Because the region holding the entrance to the Refuge will soon be upon us,” Contemplation said. “We will have to make our case to the people and have a decision soon after. Then we’ll need to divide the city and go hunting for the way. And I’d rather know…”



"...IF YOU NEED a babysitter or not."

Contemplation's smug tone still echoed in Nomad's mind as, three hours later, he and Rebeke burst from the cloud cover back into the light of the rings. Previously faint to him, the illumination now seemed bright as…well, not day. A night with the largest of the moons shining, perhaps.

They were again on Rebeke's quadcycle. As she'd been the one to rescue him, the others seemed happy to make her play nursemaid to him. He wasn't certain what she thought of that. She hadn't said more than a few words to him as she found him a place to rest, then scrounged up some clothing for him. He'd worried they'd have trouble finding something that fit him, but the local seamstresses worked with serious efficiency. Perhaps that's what happened to a society when it was constantly on the run from superheated death.

So he now wore a long brown duster coat with deep pockets, as he preferred. It was the second they'd offered him—the first had looked too

much like a uniform. He was still ashamed of how he'd snapped at Rebeke for that. This one was rather nice. It had been a few worlds since he'd been able to obtain something this suited to his tastes. Under it, he wore sturdy trousers and a light shirt.

As they soared out of the darkness on the large hovercycle, a small fleet of ships followed. He and Rebeke, along with other scouts on hovercycles, had come out first to make sure the Cinder King wasn't here. Now that the way was confirmed clear, though, the rest of Beacon had arrived.

Beacon, it turned out, was made up of around a hundred and fifty people—and around thirty ships. Most of those ships, as he'd seen at the larger city—called Union, he'd since learned—resembled bumblebees more than hornets. But all could fly, and fly well.

He was still amazed that entire cities could just disassemble on command. He told himself that he'd seen tens of planets by now and ought to be too jaded to marvel at each novelty. Yet the truth was that each one had something like this—some fascinating quirk that made him want to linger, study, learn.

If he did, of course, the Night Brigade would take him—all to find the next link in the chain leading to their prize. He was certain their treatment of him would be very illuminating. His insides would get to see the light for the first time.

He turned his mind from that to surveying the landscape. He'd noticed the mud earlier, the leftovers of the passing storm in the darkness. The ground was basically grey slush here, no sign of plants or life at all—but that didn't mean it was boring or flat.

Improvised rivers had already carved channels in the mud, eroding soil, creating networks. It all had the feel of an estuary, where river met ocean. Except without the ocean. There were lakes, though. Shallow expanses of water that reflected the rings above in striking, colorful mimicry.

The landscape had a strange variety to it. He'd imagined this entire place like one big salt flat or mud pit, but they passed steep hills and winding valleys with water running down them. Among them stood strange rock formations, wickedly jagged and pocked with holes. They passed a plain with hundreds of them, like sculptures made by a madman.

What do you think of those? the studiously serious knight asks, somewhat confusedly.

"You know," he replied, "Master Wit always told me to avoid using too many adverbs in descriptions."

And how am I to project my emotions, then? he asks even more confusedly.

"Through context. Tone of voice."

Tone of voice, he says flatly, he said flatly. *I have exactly one tone, Nomad. Being dead has costs, you know.*

"Silence, unfortunately, not being one of them."

The rock formations, Nomad, he says with mounting exasperation. What are they?

"Strange. That's what they are."

Normally he'd have expected those sorts of formations to come from prolonged weathering. But if that were the case, these would have smooth sides, not that craggy, cratered look, like…

Like molten stone, suddenly frozen, he realized, *in the process of being ejected from the earth.* A volcanic eruption, suddenly hit by cold rain and locked in place. *That's* what these felt like to him.

"Hey," he said, switching to the local tongue. He waved to Rebeke, who was in the driver's seat to his left. "Those rock formations. Those are made by the sunlight? Superheating the ground, making magma erupt?"

"Best we can guess," she said, shouting over the rush of the wind. "The coming of the Sky Tyrant causes great distress to the land. Everything melts or breaks apart each day, and by the time we pass again, nothing is the same."

"Wait," he said. "*Nothing* is the same?"

"Nothing," she called. "Though some generalities persist—there are highlands to the south—no individual features remain day to day. Those hills, they weren't here last time. It's all shaped anew. The Chorus tells of our old world. A land of quietude, where the landscape slumbered and didn't transform daily. But that place was also Hell, so…"

"I've been there," he called back. "Food's good, but the ghosts are a huge pain. I'm not surprised your ancestors wanted out."

She gave him a pointed look. "Don't lie."

"Lie?"

"You haven't been to Hell," she shouted.

He shrugged. He'd been through many varieties of hell, though only the planet Threnody was literally called by the term. But who cared if she believed him or not?

That magma thing. How'd you realize it was the case? the knight interjects.

“No erosion on the formations,” he explained in Alethi. “Makes sense that this landscape would be subject to extreme forces. It’s remarkable. Like a primordial planet, still forming.”

What would it be like to live in a place where you could make no maps? A land with no familiar landmarks? Nothing permanent except what you carried with you? Under those circumstances, he’d be looking for a quiet cavern to settle into as well. But it also explained why there weren’t many of those.

If the surface got fried every day to the point it cracked and let molten rock come surging out…well, that wasn’t conducive to stable, habitable caverns. Again, he doubted that this Refuge *could* be any sort of cavern.

Beyond that, a part of him whispered that something didn’t add up here. That he was missing a piece of the puzzle. Superheated light might make stone flow on the surface, but eruptions? He was no expert, but he thought those were usually caused by the *opposite* effect. Heat below and coolness above—with a generous helping of tectonic activity to create new pathways for that heat to escape.

Highly Invested light would also make traveling in the system by starship nearly impossible. Yet he had evidence of Scadrians being here. So what was really going on with the mechanics of this planet?

“I assume,” he said to Rebeke, “the unstable landscape is why we have to search to find the doorway into the Refuge?”

“Yes,” she said, pointing at a nearby group of five ships with round, flat bases. They swept along the ground at a low hover, moving together in a deliberate pattern. “We use prospector ships, which can sense energy sources under the soil. Every now and then, during regular searches, the Cinder King would find the doorway. He became obsessed with it and the stories of the Refuge. That only intensified when he got the key. It came from a body one of his outriders found, a stranger who had died in a mudslide.”

Nomad nodded, thoughtful. Those prospectors were large machines for doing something as simple as sensing Investiture, but not everyone was lucky enough to have a Seeker on staff.

“You were his subjects, then?” he said to her over the wind. “The Cinder King? Before you broke away and hid in the darkness?”

“Essentially,” she said, slowing the cycle to drink from her canteen. Then she continued without having to shout. “He ‘keeps the law.’ Has influence over basically every habitable corridor and has incorporated any cities of significance or size into Union.

“With smaller towns like ours, he’d send a few officials to represent him. Along with some of those Charred of his, of course, ready to enforce their orders. We just lived with it. For years—ever since I can remember, actually—we lived under his thumb. Until he started to change his rhetoric, get more aggressive, claiming that his destiny was to unite all people into one city. So then—”

She glanced to the side as a ship flew past. They’d stowed Elegy, her sister, in there. A kind of improvised prison. Nomad found it wild they didn’t have an actual jail.

“Elegy,” Rebeke said, “always had such grand dreams. She could persuade anyone of anything, so long as she was passionate about it. I hoped so much that we could…do something for her. When I locked her away earlier, she shouted at me. It was her voice, but there’s nothing of her in the eyes. I…” She slumped in her seat, head bowed.

Storms, this girl needed sleep and time to mourn, not another mission. But the sun didn’t wait. They were constrained by its timetable. Maybe she’d be able to rest once they opened the doorway…

But of course she wouldn’t. Because the doorway wouldn’t lead to a refuge. He steeled himself. “The Cinder King,” he said. “He’ll be looking for you out here, right?”

“He’s *always* looking for us,” she replied. “However, Zeal replaced the key he stole with a fake. So with Adonalsium’s blessing, the Cinder King does not yet know what we have done. He will have patrols trying to spot us, but only the regular ones. And perchance we will find fortune today—in that he rarely patrols this region.”

“Why?”

“Because it is the way that his city, Union, will come anyway, once their harvest is finished,” she explained. “Why would we be so foolish as to fly directly into his path? His riders usually search the far reaches of this corridor and those nearby, presuming to find us there, attempting our own harvests.”

They fell silent.

“You can’t flee to another corridor?” Nomad asked. “You said there are places he can’t influence?”

“He influences all,” she said, “but there are some places he doesn’t care about—because they are inhospitable.” She pointed northward. “Travel up that way an hour or so, and it’s all his territory until you reach the deadband, where food does not grow. To be exiled there is a death sentence.”

She turned, pointing south. “The southern band used to be habitable, but a mountain range has sprung up these last few years. It gets higher and higher. Like I said, while individual features vanish, some large-scale ones persist. We keep hoping this mountain range will melt away, but it hasn’t, and so all the people in that corridor had to relocate northward—crowding these corridors. Giving the Cinder King more sway because it is easier to oppress them.”

“Wait,” Nomad said. “Why is a mountain range a big deal? Just fly over it.”

“We can’t fly that high,” she said. “The ships can’t manage it. And it extends far enough that if you try to go around, you inevitably end up getting caught in some valley and dying. So instead we hide in the darkness and dodge his patrols.”

Nomad found that curious. Their technology…some things about it baffled him. That wasn’t, however, an unusual experience for him. The more he’d traveled, the more he’d learned that technology didn’t follow a flat progression. Planets often had extreme knowledge in one area, but ignorance in others. He’d met one society capable of complex mathematics and with a brilliant understanding of architecture—but with no concept of the wheel, as they lived in a dense jungle, where developing it hadn’t made as much sense as it did in places with a lot of flat land and straight roads.

So, the knight muses, they lived under the Cinder King. That—admittedly—sounds bad. But could it truly be worse than the rest of life on this planet? Was his rule so horrible that going off to live in pure darkness was better?

That depended. In Nomad’s experience, it wasn’t when life was utterly terrible that people rebelled. It instead happened when life improved to the point that people had time to think, time to wonder. The capacity to imagine.

So maybe things here had recently progressed enough to make people wonder if they needed a dictator or not.

“The Cinder King,” Nomad said. “He taxed you? How badly?”

“Badly,” she said softly. “The lottery happened once a rotation.”

Lottery?

Well, *there* was a word that varied widely by context. Remembering his experience on Union, he braced himself for the worst. “A…lottery of people?”

She nodded. “What else would it be?”

“And what did he do with them?”

She frowned, studying him. Then she narrowed her eyes. “You…don’t know?”

He shook his head.

“It’s true?” she whispered. “There’s a place where they don’t use sunhearts?”

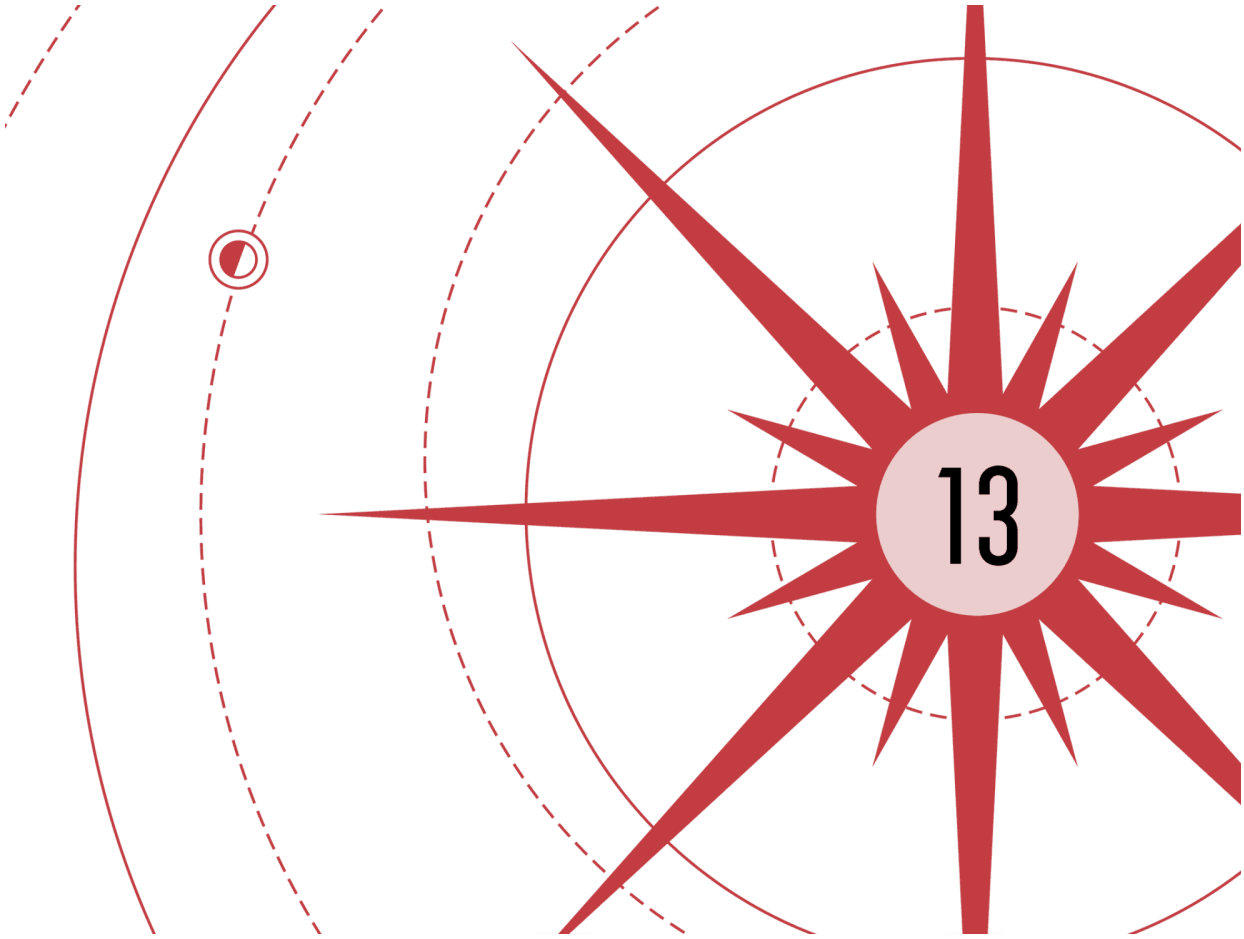
“The power sources?” he said, rapping his knuckles on the cycle’s housing. “I mean, everyone I’ve known uses power of one sort or another, but I’ve never seen these ones. Where do you get them? Is it…” He trailed off.

Sunhearts.

Lottery.

“People?” he asked. “These power sources used to be *people*?”

“This one here,” she said, resting her hand on the housing, “was my mother. Two weeks ago. We left her for the sun, then recovered her sunheart on the next rotation. Her body vaporized by the heat, her soul condensed into this stone.”



STORMS.

Storms.

Suddenly his experiences upon arrival took on an even *more* sinister cast. That's what the Cinder King had been doing. That's what the strange game of tag had been about: choosing the next people to be sacrificed to the sun. Not in some primitive, pagan way—but in a modern one. Equally horrible, but with more economics.

That's terrible, the hero exclaims, imbuing his words with sickened disgust.

It wasn't unprecedented. Nomad hadn't been to Nalthis—the place sounded nice, and nice places tended to be easy for the Night Brigade to find—but they bought, sold, and traded chunks of people's souls like they were gemstones. BEUs as a measurement were based on this system—though at least there, the transaction left you alive.

“That’s why there aren’t any ghosts here,” he said softly in Alethi. “Threnodites, they have this phantom echo to their souls. A sort of smoky shadow that lives on after they die. Here, there’s not a chance for that. Their souls are condensed, fused, turned into…”

A power cell. One of which he’d consumed to make his Connection to this planet. Another event that took on a gruesome air in hindsight. He felt at his coat pocket, where he’d hidden the drained core after getting his new clothing.

One soul’s worth, even with a shade attached, wouldn’t be enough for us to absorb over a thousand BEUs of Investiture like we did, Aux said. *So there must be some other force filling the stone, like Stormlight on Roshar. The sunlight must be Invested, as we guessed. It’s supercharging the remnants of the soul as the person is killed.*

It was the only thing that made sense, as they’d never be able to power entire cities from souls alone. Not without running out of people very quickly. Still, the implications of it left him nauseous.

“Your reaction,” Rebeke said. “It’s genuine, isn’t it? You had no idea what sunhearts were.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then, in truth, there’s hope. Authentic hope. A better life than even Elegy presumed to offer.”

“Your city…still uses such sacrifices?” Nomad said.

“What else are we to do? We can’t outrun the sun without power. Unlike the Cinder King’s lottery, my people have always used volunteers. From among the elderly, the sickly.” She absentmindedly traced the outline of the sunheart’s housing. “Mother was dying. She might have had months left, she might have had days, she might have had years. But we had three spent sunhearts and ships that couldn’t flee. So…” She took a deep breath.

“So you leave people out to die,” he said. “They become these…power sources. How do you find them again?”

“The prospector ships,” she said. “It’s why we have them. Sunhearts float near the top of magma for some reason. You can find them in roughly the same place you left the people, though you often have to pry them from the stone.” Her hand stilled. “My brother installed Mother’s sunheart here, in our quadcycle, so I could have it near me. Now that he’s…he’s gone, and Mother, and even Elegy…”

This storming world, the knight says with a breathless voice. Indicating horror, not arousal, since that word is sometimes used both ways. Just in

case you were wondering.

"When they captured me," Nomad said, "the Cinder King took off his glove and seized me by the face. He expected something to happen. It didn't."

That comment shook Rebeke out of her melancholy, prompting her to stare at him again. She looked at his hands. Ungloved. Clearly curious, Rebeke removed her right glove, then hesitated.

"May I?" she asked.

He shrugged. So she reached across and touched his wrist.

"Nothing," she said, amazed.

"And what is *supposed* to happen?"

"I should be able to draw out your heat," she said. "Some of your soul. As I initiated the touch, I should be able to pull it forth from your body, cooling you—it's what the bracers do. They did work on you, though?"

"Unfortunately," he said. "What is being drawn from you is something we call Investiture. A different state of energy, and the removal of it cools you in the process. That's a side effect, though. Because of your heritage, your people have an interesting type of Investiture—as do I, though mine is of a different variety."

"Why did the bracers work on you," she said, "but my touch does not?"

It was tough to say. Though he'd once made a study of this sort of thing, it had been decades since he'd given it much thought. And the various nuances of Investiture could be tricky even for an expert.

"Investiture is finicky," he said. "Usually requires specific things—Intent, Commands, familiarity—to manipulate. It's likely that the bracers were brutal enough to force through my protections, but your touch isn't."

She pulled her hand away from him and blushed, quickly putting her glove back on. "It's unusual," she said, "to do that."

"What?" he asked. "Touch someone?"

She nodded, embarrassed. "Normally it only happens because of accidents."

"I saw the Cinder King do it intentionally," he said. "Killing people in the arena, consuming their Investiture."

"Yes," she whispered. "He can draw forth heat quickly, powerfully, by force. He can feed upon a human being, leave them a dead husk. He has… fed on thousands of people at this point."

Wow, Aux said. *Thousands? Watch that one, Nomad. If he's that highly Invested…he could be seriously dangerous.*

“Regardless,” Rebeke continued, “any touch can lead to heat being drawn or given—even for a normal person and even if not intended. It is rare for it to be dangerous, though.”

“So, wait,” Nomad said. “If you touch, you start draining Investiture from one another?”

“There are prayers to formalize it,” she said. “But…yes, a prolonged touch can cause it to begin. Accidents. Or…intimacy.”

“You freeze each other during sex?”

Well, that’s new, the hero says to his overly blunt valet. Certainly didn’t have that on the list of cultural features I was expecting to find on this world.

Rebeke’s face grew redder. “In truth, we pass heat back and forth. It’s… not something I should have to explain to you.”

“Fair enough,” he said, thinking. These people had a natural, biological ability to leech Investiture from one another. Almost everything had some Invested component, but the extremities of experience—specifically the strange things he could do *and* the strange things that had been done to him—were *deeply* related to the nature of Investiture.

That included his Torment. There was a physical component. A mental component. But the real shackles were spiritual—Investiture. So maybe…

A plan began to form in his mind. A way to potentially escape his affliction. Or at the very least lessen the symptoms of it.

Nomad, the knight interjects—likely interrupting musings about his incredible nature—I see something. Ship twenty degrees to your right. Very distant.

Nomad focused on the direction Auxiliary had indicated. While Aux didn’t have a physical shape unless Nomad called him as an object, the spren could use Nomad’s body to experience the world. Aux had been keeping watch, even if Nomad hadn’t.

Nomad spotted it: a small ship approaching in the distance. “Scout,” he said to Rebeke. “I think it’s observing us. You should warn the others.”

Rebeke followed his gaze, then cursed softly. She flipped a switch on the side of her seat, and the fuselage to Nomad’s left split open. Rebeke’s seat and the metal around it *unlocked* from the main body of the cycle. Sections at the front and sides folded out simultaneously, forming into her own one-person hovercycle, sleek, efficient.

As he’d guessed, this quadcycle could eject the four portions with seats. The vessel wasn’t so much one large hovercycle as it was a carrier of four smaller ones.

“Impressive,” he said. “Can *everything* on this planet break apart into smaller, functional pieces? If we crash this thing, is it going to disintegrate into a hundred even *smaller* cycles?”

“Call in what you saw to warn the others,” she said to him, then leaned down, ready to go after the scout.

“Don’t go right for it!” Nomad shouted. “It’s observing. See how it’s descending to the terrain to be harder to spot? It’s probably reporting in via radio. I’d bet that scout thinks they’ve caught us planting seeds. If you go screaming toward it, the scout will *know* it’s been spotted.”

She paused, seeing the wisdom in that. “It can’t be reporting in,” she said. “We have our entire city here, including our radio jammers. That will disrupt their signals.”

Nomad wondered again at their varied technologies. Then again, maybe they weren’t using actual radio waves, and his mind interpreted the word that way for convenience. Might be some kind of Connection-based communication, if it was powered by these sunhearts.

“Then it’s even more important not to alert the scout they’ve been seen,” he said. “Here. Let me show you.”

He turned and looked down by his leg, in the same location where she’d reached to unlock her cycle. There, he found a handle, almost flush with the side of the craft. At her nod, he turned it, and his own cycle disconnected from the central fuselage.

The resulting single seater was more like the hovercycles he’d flown on other worlds. He pulled it out beside hers.

“This is as small as they get,” she noted. “These don’t even have their own sunhearts; they have a battery that will last you about an hour before needing to reattach to the main vehicle to recharge.”

“Great,” he said. “Follow me.” He turned his cycle vaguely toward the distant scout ship. He made a wide loop, as if he were going to check on the prospectors.

She followed, and as they passed the point closest to the still-distant scout, she pulled up beside Nomad. “Now?” she asked, eager.

“No,” he said. “We’ll do one more loop. Make it seem like this is a normal part of our routine. This time, we’ll swing out wider, though.”

She nodded, watching the scout intently.

“Didn’t you just recently get into trouble for exceeding your orders?” he asked. “They’re going to yell at you again.”

“If it pleases you to know, it is ever my lot,” she said. “Should I care?”

He smiled. “I don’t see why you should.”

She suddenly seemed uncertain. “I…I offer the concern that the scout might be a Charred. What would we do then?”

“Then we’ll ask if they want some tea,” Nomad said. “What do you *think* we’ll do? We’ll kill the bastard before they kill us.” He leaned in, watching her. She was *eager*. Maybe it was the recklessness of someone who had nothing left to live for. Maybe it was a thirst for vengeance. Most likely it was just wanting to do something—anything—to keep her mind off her loss. He’d been there. Too many times.

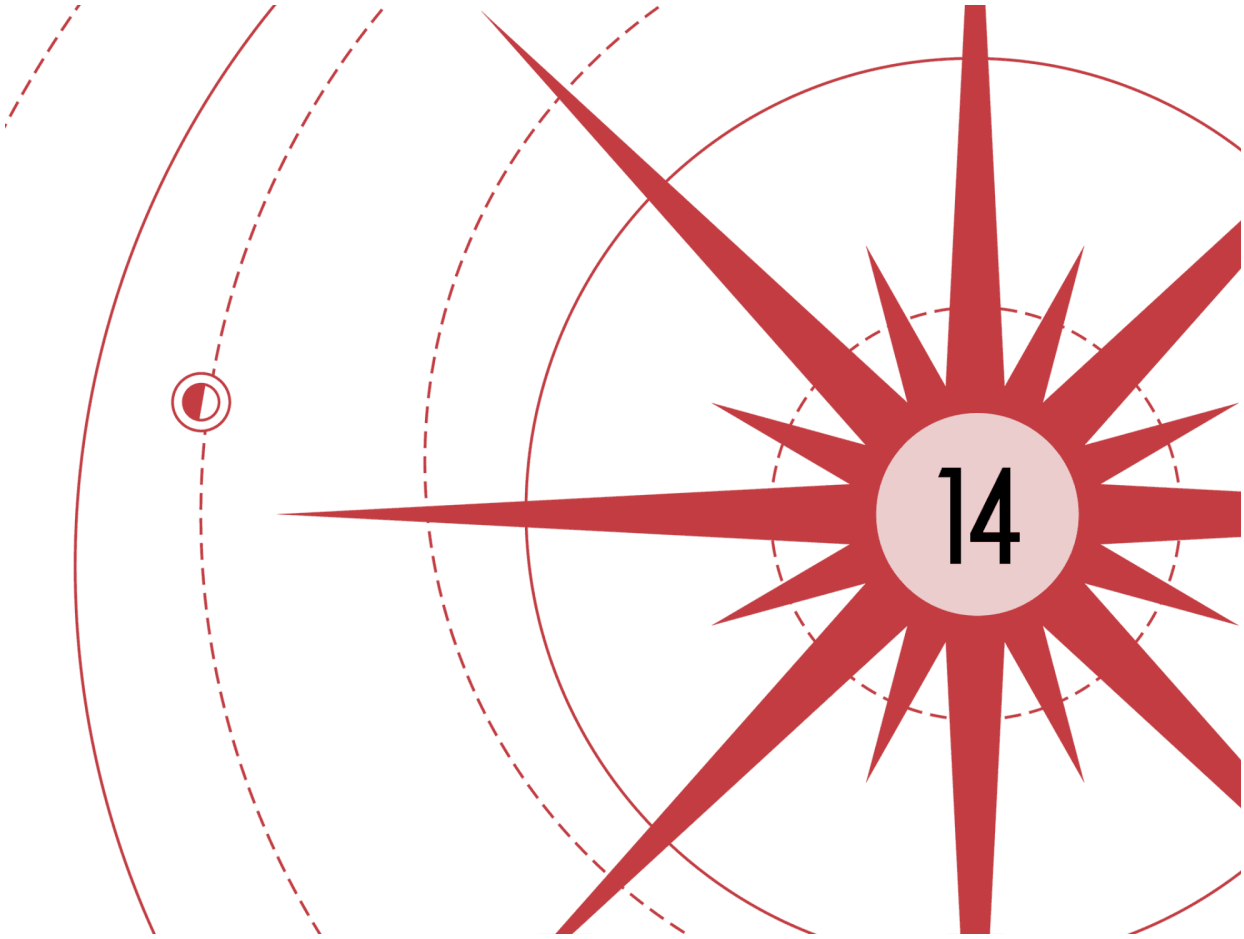
There is something odd about the way these people act, the knight muses to himself. I assume you’ve noticed.

“Yes,” he said in Alethi. “There’s a kind of strange timidity to them. Even the sharpshooters don’t really feel like soldiers—I wouldn’t be surprised to find they are repurposed hunters.” After all, they used the term “killer” like it was a dividing line. As if some people were capable of it, and some people weren’t.

Either way, he sensed a hunger in Rebeke. A desire to act, to fight back. He led her in another wide loop, getting closer to the scout’s location. The hovercycle controls were surprisingly intuitive. He supposed that made sense; if your entire society relied on constant flight, then you’d want your ships to be simple to fly.

The scout had taken cover beside a rock formation, like a large wave of magma that had been frozen in place. They were much closer now, but a distance still separated them—perhaps equal to what they’d already covered. Getting closer would be suspicious.

“All right,” Nomad said to Rebeke. “*Now!*”



TOGETHER THEY BOLTED to the side, punching their cycles to maximum speed, zipping straight toward that scout.

He saw them immediately. A gaunt man in a white coat with red stripes, he spun his hovercycle and fled, keeping low to the ground and darting into what appeared to be a large lava tube. That was dangerous, but would reduce the chance of being shot from above or behind.

Nomad swung in low to follow, and Rebeke joined him, an intense expression on her face, wind playing with her black and silver hair. Nomad let himself smile. It felt good to be in the air. Moving. A second later, they darted into the lava tube—a large circular stone tunnel. Broken in many places, open to the sky, twisting and turning. Requiring hairpin turns and careful judging of speed not to slam into the wall.

You remember, the knight notes with a roll of his eyes, when we first met? You told me you were "the sensible one" who "didn't rush headlong into every fight that came your way."

"Nope," he said. "Doesn't sound like something I'd say."

Yeah, and what happened to wanting to lie low? Taking the easy road? Does that sound like the current you?

"Just trying to keep this girl alive."

That's remarkably uncynical of you.

"Eh. I'm bored."

Nomad took another turn, barely keeping sight of the scout ahead in the shadowed tunnel, dark enough between broken sections of rock that only the glow of an engine indicated their quarry.

A moment later, a voice sounded over the radio. "What are you doing?" Contemplation demanded, barely audible against the rushing air.

"We're checking on something," he replied, thumbing the communication button. "A scout, we think."

"Sunlit Man," Contemplation said, "you are needed to open the doorway."

"Have you found it yet?"

"No. The landscape is extremely difficult this time."

"Well, we won't get the chance if the Cinder King arrives. So it's best if we stop this scout before he can report."

"And if you die? You promised to activate the key—without you, we'll be locked out."

"If I die," he said, "that immediately stops being my problem, then, doesn't it?"

"Reckless fools," she muttered. "If it pleases you—and I doubt *anything* does—you should stop encouraging Rebeke. She's all we have left of her family, and I should prefer to see her safely ensconced in the Refuge before my time arrives."

Feeling the epiphany like a punch to the gut, he realized what she was referring to: her time to die in the sunlight, to become a powerpack for her people. This society was all kinds of wrong. But one did what one must to survive; he understood that better than most.

For now, he ignored the radio, leaned down, and enjoyed the chase. The scout flew well, staying ahead of them in the tunnel—but none of them were flying at full speed. These turns were too tight.

And unfortunately the scout didn't need to escape. He just had to get close enough to home to draw attention. So Nomad might have to do something foolish.

"Take the next exit through the broken ceiling, Rebeke," he said over the radio. "I'm going to punch this up a little."

"*What?*"

Nomad slammed the accelerator beneath his left foot, zipping forward. He couldn't directly attack this fellow, even if he did get close. His best bet was to get right on his tail and push the man to be reckless.

The lava tube spat them out into a canyon a moment later. Nomad wove through it, noting how the rock walls were pocked with holes caused by escaping gases as the magma cooled. He could imagine this whole place forming as rainwater poured through the lava flow—stone solidifying amid explosions of steam as hot and cold clashed.

The scout glanced over his shoulder, showing a face with a long mustache. Then he accelerated in a sudden burst—frantically banking around a tight curve. Nomad followed, closing in, trying to get close enough to breathe down the man's neck. Indeed, as the two of them burst into the next section of canyon, the scout glanced over his shoulder again—and was startled to see how close Nomad had gotten. He sped up, even though this portion was narrower, and full of jagged lava stone occlusions.

Engines aflame, twin roars echoing down the canyon, they slipped in and out of shadow as tall peaks alternately obscured and revealed the rings.

The knight wonders, with increasing uncertainty, if his faithful servant has any storming idea what he is doing. He does realize what he is doing, right? Getting into a high-speed chase with someone who lives on a planet full of expert pilots?

They might be expert pilots, but Nomad was an expert in being chased. While he doubted he was as good a pilot as his quarry, the scout's motions were becoming increasingly erratic. He took turns too sharply, speeding up into curves instead of straightaways. Constantly checking over his shoulder.

Such a familiar feeling. So many times, the Night Brigade had nearly gotten him. Right at his back, their sights on him. Nomad knew that sense of panic, that scrambling burst of adrenaline. The dangers ahead of you suddenly trivial compared to the one behind you. You fixated on it, taking greater and greater risks.

It was the story of his life.

The scout knew the sun's pursuit. It too gave chase—but in a slow, inevitable, overbearing way. Not quick or *immediate*. Not like this. Nomad whizzed a little too close to a rock formation, felt it whoosh next to his head. At these speeds, a small miscalculation would cause a big explosion.

Unfortunately, just when Nomad was sure he was about to win, they burst out into an open section of the canyonlands. Surrounded by mesas and

peaks, this flatter region was essentially the floor of a large crater. That let the scout maximize his speed. Their cycles were matched in that regard, so Nomad stayed in close pursuit—but there was little he could do if he caught up. He needed to—

Lava erupted from the ground nearby. A geyser of brilliant orange-red heat sprayed flakes of fire, ash, and soot. Sparks washed over the front of Nomad's cycle and kept burning, even when the wind should have extinguished them.

Damnation, the knight exclaims. Voice full of emotion. The surprised kind.

The scout probably should have taken them higher to avoid the eruptions. But he wasn't thinking clearly, it seemed. Instead he turned, trying to swing out closer to the steep crater walls—perhaps thinking the ground might be more stable there.

Another section of stone exploded, hurling chunks of melting rock into the air. They fell around the cycles, shattering on the ground and bursting like fireworks. Muttering a few curses, Nomad broke off from direct pursuit as an entire wall of fire erupted from the ground just ahead—a wave of crimson stone that sloshed back down, parts of it immediately blackening and slumping like wax. Other parts kept glowing, like the heat of life itself.

He swerved around the obstacle, barely spotting another eruption from the buckling ground in time to dodge it. Reluctantly he pulled upward—out of the dangerous region, high into the sky. There, he resumed his pursuit, but the scout was far ahead. Too far. He'd almost reached the far side of the crater. Where—

A shot of light from above blasted the man off his cycle. The body dropped, sending the machine itself tumbling across the earth in a dusty, end-over-end collapse.

Nomad looked up to see Rebeke on her cycle a short distance ahead of him, rifle to her shoulder. Right. He *had* told her to get ahead, hadn't he?

He pulled up next to her, breathing deeply, heart racing. What had caused those geysers of magma? They were basically as far from the sunlight as one could get. This should be the *most* tectonically stable region of the planet, though maybe none of it was all that stable. Extreme convection or tidal forces might cause all kinds of issues with the crust breaking and—

Nope. Stop.

None of that.

He wiped his brow as another molten geyser erupted below. "Your planet," he said to her, "is rather emotional, isn't it? Never met one that I

could rightly say has tantrums."

She barely seemed to be paying attention. She stared down at the fallen scout.

"Rebeke?" Nomad asked.

"I…" She looked at him. "I shot him."

"Storms. Was that your first time?"

She nodded. "I've shot before. At people. Never hit, though." She shivered visibly. "I'm a hunter. All of us who can shoot are hunters; it's how we get meat. But to shoot at people…I mean, the Cinder King's people do it, but that's always seemed so…awful."

And you're right again, the knight tells him. About the hunters. How do you do it?

A lifetime of paying attention.

"I don't feel different," Rebeke said, "but I feel like I *should*. Does that make sense?"

Nomad shrugged. "My first time was with a spear. I had to keep fighting, didn't even get time to pause as his blood ran down onto my fingers." He shook his head. "That night, at stew, it just felt like a surreal day of training. I barely remembered the moment itself."

She nodded.

She seems comforted, the knight notes, even though the squire didn't say anything actually helpful.

"Knowing you aren't strange," he explained in Alethi, "*is* helpful. Knowing others felt like you did. Sometimes it's the only thing that *is* helpful."

"Why do you do that?" Rebeke asked. "Talk gibberish sometimes?"

"It's my own language," he said. "In other places, Rebeke, people speak all kinds of words you wouldn't recognize."

"But why speak it now? When nobody can understand?"

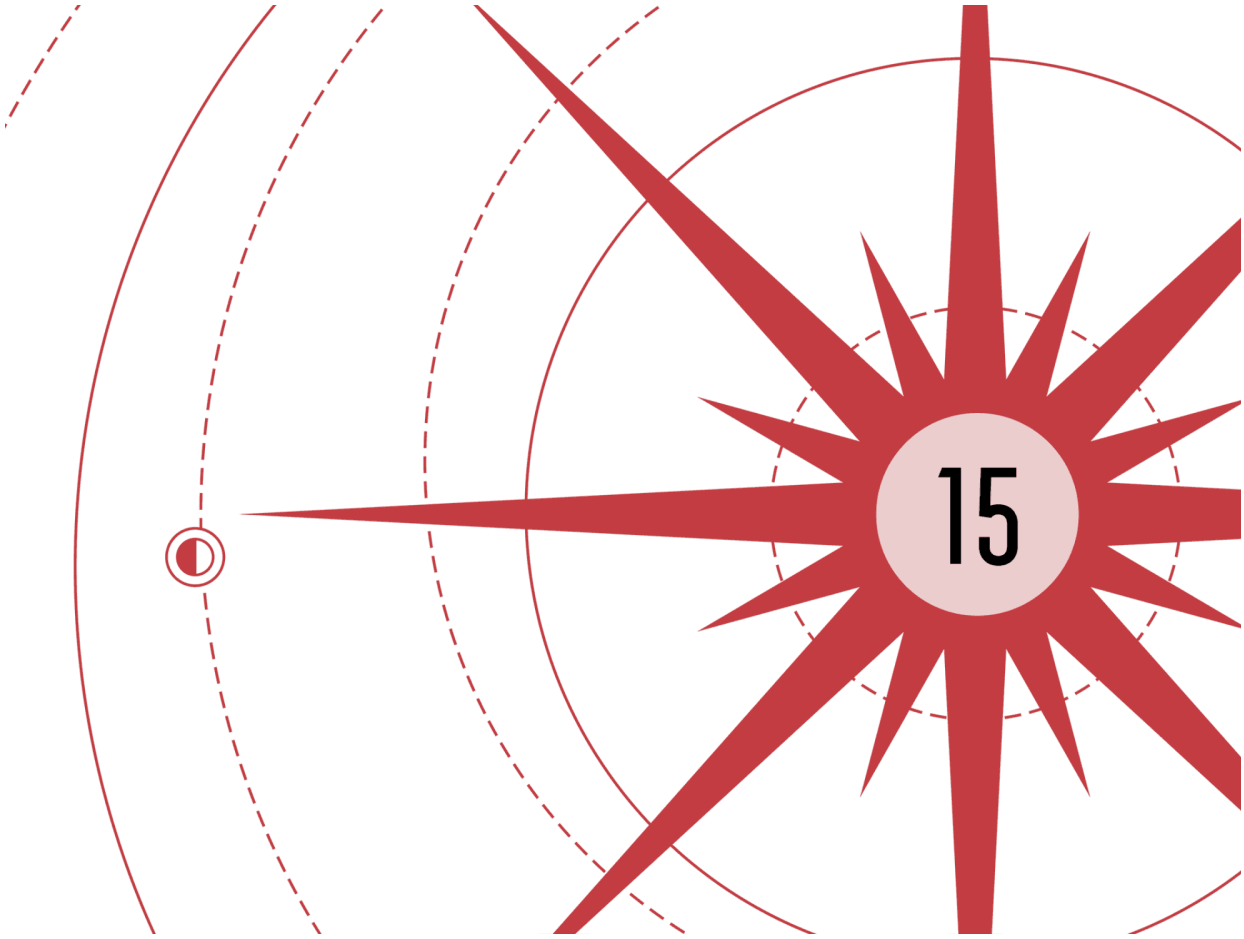
"I'm offering prayers," he said, picking a lie he thought might appeal to her, "to one of the ancient gods of my realm."

Please, no, the knight says. I'm no god. I work for a living.

Nomad checked to make certain his cycle had some flight time left, then nodded down toward the crash. "Come on. Let's go check on him."

"Why?" Rebeke said. "He's dead."

"Lesson number one about being a killer, Rebeke," he said. "Always make sure."



REBEKE POINTEDLY DIDN'T look at the corpse. Nomad considered forcing her to confront it. No use in her trying to pretend she hadn't shot the fellow. If she really wanted to protect her people, this wouldn't be the last man she'd have to kill.

He didn't bother. It wasn't his job to train her. Instead he did a cursory inspection of the corpse—and when he found a treasured picture, obviously drawn by a child, tucked into a pocket, he slipped it back into place without mentioning it to Rebeke.

She was kneeling beside the wreckage of the scout's cycle. "We'll salvage this," she said, then walked to her own cycle, lifted the seat, and pulled out a tow cable stored inside. "Even if it's beyond repair, salvaging this is easier than harvesting metal from the iron fields."

"Iron fields?" Nomad asked, crouching down.

"Places where molten metal coats the surface each rotation," she said, walking back. "One corridor north. We sneak in during the darkness and pry

up some of it before the Cinder King's forces arrive."

"And you use this how?" he asked, frowning. "Do you have full fabrication plants on your ships?"

"Fabrication plants?" she asked, cocking her head. "We use the Chorus, obviously. The spirits, like the one that follows you, create the objects we need."

Ahhh, the knight intones. That sounds interesting.

"Stop trying to bait me," he muttered in Alethi, then switched to her language. "Send someone else to salvage this, Rebeke. What is that blinking light there on the dash of the cycle?"

She cursed softly, lowering her towline. She knelt again, tapping a small, green-on-black indicator screen that was cracked but still flickering.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That shows an incoming radio signal," she said. "The speaker is busted, so we can't hear what they're saying. But…"

"But someone was calling this fellow when he went down," Nomad said. "Which means we got out of range of your signal blockers before he died. Damnation. He probably radioed in the moment he had a chance."

"It's what I'd have done," Rebeke said.

"This means they know he's down and that something, or *someone*, killed him."

"What if they send more troops? What if they send Charred? What if they bring the *entire city*?"

Nomad stood up, dusting off his hands. "Surely you know the answer to that by now." He started off toward his cycle. In front of him, the brilliant display of erupting earth had subsided, leaving the field pocked with holes and mounds of black lava rock.

"Nomad!" she called from behind. "I don't want this. To be a killer. To be like…like you."

He looked back, and a glib response came to his tongue.

Nomad, she's hurting, Auxiliary reminded him. *Please.*

He hesitated, seeing Rebeke holding to the towline she'd fetched, looking anywhere but at the corpse. Eyes downcast. He'd noticed, of course. It would be a bright day in the Weeping before Auxiliary read a human's emotions better than he did. Empathy, though…well, he should feel ashamed that a creature that was both dead *and* inhuman did a better job of that.

"I know," he said to Rebeke, letting his other response go. "Keep that in mind. It might help."

She nodded. He gave her a moment, walking over to his hovercycle to radio back to Contemplation. Perhaps he was supposed to call all three of the Greater Good at once, but their rules were irrelevant to him, and he liked Contemplation. She saw through him.

"Hey," he said. "We got the scout, but it seems likely he radioed home first. You might have company on the way. How's the hunt going?"

"Terribly," Contemplation said. "There doesn't seem to be anything here, though we're in the right place."

"How can you tell?" he asked, curious.

"Celestial navigation," she said. "We can tell from the rings and the stars. Those are the glowing things—"

"I know what stars are, thank you," he said.

"Just checking. Well, they can tell us with reasonable accuracy where we are on the planet. The corridor we're in is easy to determine. Harder to tell the longitude, however. You need—"

"Precise clocks," he said. "Yes. I'm aware of that too."

"Strange, how much you know about the surface world for one who lived his life underneath it."

"Keep asking yourself questions like that, Contemplation," he said, "and maybe you'll eventually realize the erroneous assumptions you've made about me. Either way, we don't have a lot of time left."

"We're repeating our search," she said. "The opening might be buried deeply this time, which would make our readings difficult. Still, we *should* have found it. This is the longitude where the Cinder King stopped each time to test his key. Several of our people have seen the opening, Nomad. It's real. Yet our prospectors can't find it."

"Well, what do you want us to do?"

"You're taking orders from me now?" Contemplation asked.

"Depends on how stupid they are."

She grunted. "If it pleases you, accept this direction—stay there a little while and see if you can spot anyone coming to check on the scout. Perchance they'll just send a small group in to investigate."

"If this is the region where the door is," Nomad said, "then the Cinder King might have guessed what we're doing. He might realize you've swapped the keys."

"If we've been subjected to such ill luck, expect an entire military force. You will, at your pleasure, please warn us if that's the case."

A good enough suggestion. "We'll do it."

“I am pleased you find my direction agreeable. Did the scout have a sunheart in his vehicle?”

Nomad glanced toward Rebeke, who was already checking on that herself. At his called question, she looked back at him and shook her head.

“Looks like it was running on a battery,” he said to Contemplation.

“Shades,” she muttered. “We could have used that.”

“Your ships are running out of power?”

“We decided not to make new sunhearts,” she explained, “though we are low on power. The decision was made instead to try Elegy’s plan of getting into the Refuge. Our failures so far have left us strained for resources. They come at a terrible cost, requiring—”

“I know.”

“I was to go next,” she said, “as were my sisters in the Greater Good. Three others were to take our place. I feel…a burden of guilt, not having gone as was my time. Yet our people need leadership right now. Unfortunately, if we don’t find the entrance…we now won’t have enough power to last another rotation.”

Damnation. “Then you’d *better* find that entrance,” he said, nodding to Rebeke as she put away the towline and climbed onto her cycle.

They left the wreckage and took off, then immediately hid behind a natural merlon at the lip of the crater. Far to Nomad’s left, the sky was growing light with a predawn glow. Faintly so—this wasn’t yet even what he’d have called twilight on another planet. But sunrise wasn’t deadly on other planets, and twilight had never felt quite so ominous to him as it did here.

They powered down the cycles to conserve their batteries and kept watch—ignoring that looming light to the left. The rocks here were dark and glasslike. Obsidian, maybe. It reminded him of another place, another world he’d once traveled. A place where he’d met Auxiliary.

Rebeke dug out bread and sausage, slicing them and making a sandwich, using a spread that looked like oil with herbs. No butter, which he supposed made sense. He didn’t know what they hunted for meat, but those flying ships didn’t have room for cultivated livestock.

“Contemplation is wrong about you, isn’t she?” Rebeke asked, offering him some of the food, which he took. “She thinks you’re from some strange underground place, but I think you’re from somewhere more normal.”

“And where would that be?” he asked.

She nodded her chin up, toward the stars.

“Another world is more normal?”

“We came from another world,” she said around bites of her food. Odd, how they even ate with gloves on. “Chased by an ancient force known as the Evil.”

“It’s still there,” he said. “On your homeworld. I’ve seen it. Well, the manifestations of it.” Wild, unchained Investiture, come to life with its own alien will—forming mountain-sized figures with impossible, unnerving features and unknowable motivations. Threnody was not a place one visited to relax.

This comment finally threw her for a loop. She almost dropped her sandwich as he said it.

“Strangely, the Chorus—who hold our history—don’t speak of our leaving because of the Evil,” she continued. “No, they say it was the quarreling. The infighting that sprang up among our people. Conflict, hatred. My ancestors wanted to escape that, for it was more pernicious than the Evil itself. *Strife* destroyed our people.

“During our flight from the Evil, there was more bickering among the people. My group…we listened to the preaching of a man: the servant of Adonalsium and the original Lodestar. We left with him to a new land. We chose this.”

Nomad grunted, trying his own sandwich, which proved to be terribly bland. What he wouldn’t give for at least some chili powder. Half the planets he visited had diets with all the flavor of a cup of water. Storms, back home, even the *bread* was spicier than this sausage.

Still, it was food, and he forced it down. Investiture could sustain him, but at barely ten percent Skip capacity, he would rather not waste it on mere metabolism.

“We were supposed to be free here,” Rebeke said, still watching the horizon. “From each other. I often wonder if the first Lodestar brought us here specifically to keep us running, to give us something to focus upon. A sun that destroys, like the Evil itself, always pursuing us. Until now, it has prevented us from turning on each other.”

“You’ve gone all this time without violence?”

“We had violence,” she said. “Crimes of passion. Arguments. But no actual killers. No *trained* ones. That was the Cinder King’s innovation.”

Remarkable, the knight says. I can’t decide if they’re naive or impressive.

“It’s not human nature to kill, Aux,” he whispered in Alethi. “You must be trained to do it. If you want to be effective, at least.”

From what he'd heard, there were as many as fifty groups on this planet, all running parallel to one another in these "corridors." Enough of a population to foster interchange and prevent inbreeding, but it was also a situation begging for a tyrant's hand. Scarce resources. Many small populations unaccustomed to working together.

In that light, it *was* remarkable that it had taken so long for a Cinder King to arise. Nomad wasn't an ethnographer. As much as his master had pushed him, Nomad's interest had always been in engineering, the nature of Investiture, and the mechanisms one could create by manipulating it. Still, he had training from Wit about the nature of stories and the people who told them. So he recognized that these peoples' stories were bound to be fascinating. Enough so that part of him wished he could stay and learn them.

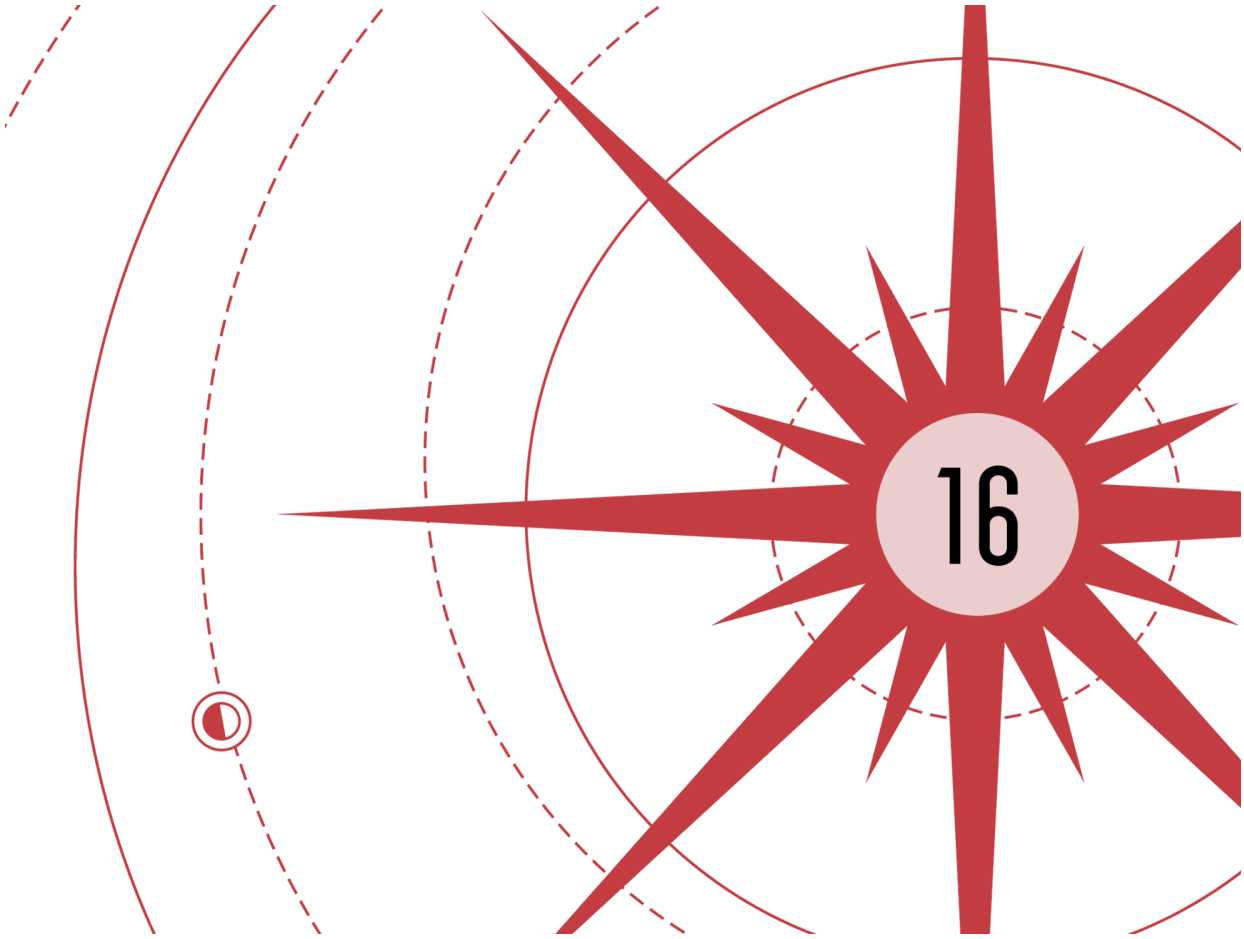
But the pursuit, the chase, ever loomed. It drove away all other thoughts, like a predator ravaging a once-placid flock.

He couldn't linger.

He *had* to get away.

So he watched keenly, instead of asking for more information. And well that he did, for he soon spotted a ship coming to check on the fallen scout. A single vessel, larger than most—perhaps the size of a small bus. Its ornamented sides glowed golden in the ringlight.

Rebeke gasped as he pointed it out. "That's the Cinder King's *own ship*!"



THE CINDER KING'S own ship?

By *itself*?

Damnation. What was going on?

"Why would he come on his own?" Rebeke asked, her confusion mirroring Nomad's own. "It makes no sense."

His frown deepened as he saw the man himself stroll out onto the deck, hands behind his back, eyes burning in the twilight. The ship parked in the sky, hovering, with the Cinder King standing at the bow. It was an invitation if Nomad had ever seen one.

"He's here for me," Nomad said.

"What? How would he even know you're here?"

"Depends on how much that scout was able to report," Nomad said.

Nomad, the knight says trepidatiously, what are you thinking?

"Trepidatiously? Is that even a word?"

Not a proper one. Oh, you're going to do something stupid, aren't you?

“I can’t stop moving,” he said. “If I stop, I die.” He switched to the local tongue. “Rebeke, I’m going to go up. Pretend that you’re not here. But if things go poorly, try to back me up.”

“Uh…” the young woman said. “How will I know if things go poorly?”

“I’ll most likely come crashing through one of those windows,” he said. “If I’m lucky, I’ll do so of my own choice.” He took a deep breath, pulled his cycle out of the overhang, restarted the engine, and went roaring into the sky.

The Cinder King’s luxury ship was hovering at the peak of what the cycle could manage, height-wise. Nomad’s vehicle strained as it hovered up to the bow, and again he noticed that his ears popped from pressure change rather quickly as he climbed to that height.

The Cinder King wore a high-collar shirt under a long coat marked with softly glowing ribbons of light, highly polished boots, and black leather gloves. He smiled, the light in his eyes mirrored by the ember in his chest.

He turned and gestured toward a docking point at the side of the deck. This ship was shaped like a seafaring boat, with narrow decks that widened near the bow, a control cabin, and storage space within the hull. Nomad hadn't seen much wood since coming here, and this thing was emblazoned with it—and with gold trim that must glitter fiercely in brighter conditions. The docking point was a rectangle cut out of the deck, where a small craft could slot in.

Nomad carefully moved into position—but didn't fully dock. He left the cycle hovering on its own power and stepped out onto the deck. From the cabin, two Charred—their simmering embers impossible to miss in the shadows—moved closer. Their king, however, waved them back. With his other hand, he reached welcomingly to Nomad.

Last time, the knight notes, he locked us up and tried to brand us. Why the change in behavior?

The Cinder King waved over a white-jacketed servant, who carried a stack of…large pieces of paper? Yes, stiff paper—almost cardboard—with pictures on them and…

"Oh," Nomad said in their tongue as the man held up the first, depicting the Cinder King and Nomad shaking hands. "Yeah, you won't need those. I figured out your language."

"You…figured it out?" the Cinder King said. Storms, those eyes were unnerving. Reminded Nomad of people he had once trusted, once loved. "In less than a day?"

"I'm a quick learner," Nomad said. "How did you know I would be here?"

"Please," the Cinder King said, smirking. "Someone brought down one of my best scouts? It was obvious. Would you kindly join me inside? No tricks, I promise."

"An oath?" Nomad said, curious. "Given so easily? Tell me what this is about, and I will consider it."

"Our initial meeting was unfortunate."

To put it mildly, the hero remarks.

"But," the Cinder King continued, "I've realized the mistake was mine. Having you be one of my Charred would have been delightful, but there is another way to have you serve me. I'd like to hire you."

"Hire me," Nomad said flatly.

“Yes,” the Cinder King said, walking briskly toward the cabin. “They do that on your planet, don’t they? That place you come from, of storms and stone? They hire men as soldiers?”

He knew?

How did he *know*?

For the first time, Nomad was legitimately intrigued by this man. He found himself following the Cinder King into the cabin. Behind a door at the front were the pilot’s controls. A small bank of screens sat atop a desk, each showing a flickering scene of the Cinder King’s ship from a different angle. Nomad had almost forgotten about the security camera he’d seen while restrained in the arena, but here was evidence of the Cinder King’s tight control over his people. One of the swiveling images faced the ground beneath the ship, zoomed in so far that Nomad could see the wreckage of the scout’s cycle. He hoped they couldn’t spot Rebeke from here. He forced himself to turn away before someone noticed where he was looking.

The majority of the space was a room with fine woods, a bar, and several plush seats. The Cinder King shooed back several Charred who haunted the room. He walked over and served himself a drink.

“Would you like some?” he asked, holding up a cup. He sipped it to prove it wasn’t poisoned, though Nomad’s body was Invested enough to handle any normal poison.

He took the drink, had a smile about the codes he used to follow, then downed it in a single shot. It was good stuff. He wouldn’t have expected that from a planet full of religious types, but then again, the best moonshine on his own planet was made by a deeply religious people. So what did he know?

“The first offworlder I killed,” the Cinder King said, sipping his own drink, “was weak. Plump, with strange long eyebrows. Tried to talk his way free through the use of some device that made his words work in our language. I didn’t know what he was. Seemed better to end him, as I thought he might be some kind of demon.

“It was in his things that I found the books.” He slipped one out of a bookcase next to the bar and held it up.

It was one of those Silverlight guidebooks, an antiquated volume—the type originally written through much travail by people visiting the various planets on difficult expeditions. That had grown easier with the advent of space travel, and Nomad felt something had been lost with the ease by which people now went from world to world.

This old volume was a survey book, which spoke of many different planets. A little on each one. Curious. It was written in Thaylen, which—with the eyebrows of the man who'd been carrying it—indicated the former owner had been from Nomad's own homeworld.

"The translation device," the Cinder King explained, "allowed me to read this book. The translator gave out eventually, but I'd been wise enough to commission written translations by then. The book speaks of all kinds of peoples from all kinds of places in the stars. I think this section is about you, though, isn't it? Rosharan. A tall people with distinctive features, like here in this illustration. Warlike, extremely aggressive, dangerous."

"A generalization," Nomad said.

"In your case, though?"

"True enough," Nomad said. "I'm surprised you invited me in. Close quarters favor me with my greater reach."

That made the man's grin grow even wider. "You *are* a killer. Tell me, you have them on your world, then? Kings, warlords, *emperors*?"

"Too many," Nomad said. "So?"

The Cinder King closed the book and rested his fingers on it. "I always felt that there was more for me to do. A greater destiny. Surely *I* wasn't meant to just live life in an endless rotation on the run from the light. I was *important*. In these books, I learned what I was to do, offworlder." He looked to Nomad, eyes glowing brightly. "I was destined to unite all of my people."

Well, Nomad had heard that somewhere before. He smiled, then he laughed. Partially because he knew the Cinder King would *hate* that sound. But mostly because, even here, it chased Nomad. In his early life, he'd passed through royal hands, traded from tyrant to tyrant like coins in the pocket. Until slavery had brought him low, and camaraderie finally led him to soar through the skies.

But storms. Even here, how many worlds away, it chased him. A pursuit of a completely different kind from the Night Brigade's.

The Cinder King's expression darkened.

"Sorry," Nomad said. "Just appreciating the irony of the situation. Please. Continue your megalomaniacal ranting."

The king walked over to one of his cabinets, from which he removed a very small sunheart. Barely glowing. "You know what this is?" he asked. "It's all that remains of your kinsman, the one who visited our planet, the one I slew. Your people make for terrible sunhearts, offworlder."

“I’m surprised you got anything,” he said. “The man you killed probably had Breath. And he was no kinsman of mine. From an entirely different country.”

“Your planet shouldn’t have different countries. You should have conquered and unified it all.”

“Conquest doesn’t remove countries,” Nomad said. “It removes lines on a map. Unity requires something else.”

The Cinder King growled softly, palming the tiny sunheart. “I thought, from what I read, you’d appreciate what I’m building here. I thought you might be inspired to find a taste of home.”

“Wrong taste,” Nomad said. “Try some curry powder next time. It has a much better flavor than tyranny. Less nutty.”

The Cinder King finished his drink, then returned the sunheart to its place. He rounded the room, passing behind one of the Charred—whom he seized by the throat. He squeezed, and the poor man didn’t fight back, barely even struggled.

“I am the most powerful man on Canticle, offworlder,” he said, still squeezing. “You see how they can’t *protest or resist*? How they serve me regardless of how I treat them? I have *absolute* power over these.” He smiled. “Once, before I rose to my destiny, I was the man who marched prisoners to their fates. There, I realized that true power is not in the ability to kill, but in the ability to control the killers.”

Well, that’s a perfectly normal and reasonable way of thinking, the knight observes sarcastically. I’m sure he’s absolutely the most well-adjusted man on the planet, eh?

Nomad said nothing. He wished that this sort of sentiment was rarer. He’d seen it in guards, in watchmen, in soldiers. He saw it in the eyes of anyone who got a *thrill* from having others in their power. The stronger the person they could push around, the more intoxicating they found it.

This man might not be brilliant or clever, though he’d think himself both. Truth was, he didn’t need either to be dangerous. Because he had power, and power—wielded by a fool—could crush anyone, smart or not. These types always gravitated toward positions of authority. During the time he’d been in command, Nomad had been forced to learn to spot them. If you didn’t, then…well, this happened. They grew, like a nest of rats.

The worst kind of bully. Many were deeply afraid, which was why they lashed out. Those you could eventually help. This kind of man, though…

Well, it was refreshing. He'd faced far, *far* too many enemies with pictures from their kids in their pockets. Killed far too many people who never deserved it. But here was a man Nomad could run through with a hot poker and only feel bad for the poker.

"What is it you want, offworlder?" the Cinder King asked, finally letting go of his Charred, who fell to his knees, gasping. Nice to know they could be strangled. That didn't work on all Invested beings.

"I'm a simple man," Nomad said, helping himself—without asking—to more of the liquor. "I run. I just want to stay ahead of the people hunting me."

The Cinder King turned to the front of the cabin, where the open doorway to the pilot's station let them see the windshield—and beyond that, the horizon, where light was growing ever brighter.

"Understandable," the Cinder King said. "I can protect you from those chasing you."

This time, Nomad almost choked on his drink as he belted out a laugh. "Yeah, all right, sure. Good luck."

"Stop laughing at me."

"Oh, don't worry," Nomad said, waving his fingers and finishing the drink. "I'm allowed to laugh at kings. I've got a card somewhere from my master, granting me authorization." He shook his head. *Damnation*, that was good liquor. He *almost* felt something from it—a very, very light buzz—and it took a lot to get through his body's protections.

An official entered and whispered something to the Cinder King, and some of his good humor returned. A moment later, two more entered from the deck, dragging Rebeke. Her hair loose from its braid, her mouth gagged, her eyes wild as she struggled.

Nomad snapped the shot glass down on the counter.

The Cinder King, misinterpreting the motion, smiled more deeply. He slipped a handgun from a holster at his hip and pointed it at the young woman.

Oh, the knight says, up until this moment I thought he might actually be smart.

"Compassion?" the Cinder King asked Nomad. "From one such as you? I expected more from a man of your world. After all my studies, I expected you to be ruthless."

Nomad sighed.

The official continued whispering to the Cinder King, and Nomad picked out the words “entire city” and “prospectors.” The Cinder King’s frown returned, and he thought for a moment—clearly aware of the area they were in. His eyes flickered to the safe on the wall where he likely kept his key, the one replaced with a fake in the chaos of the surprise attack.

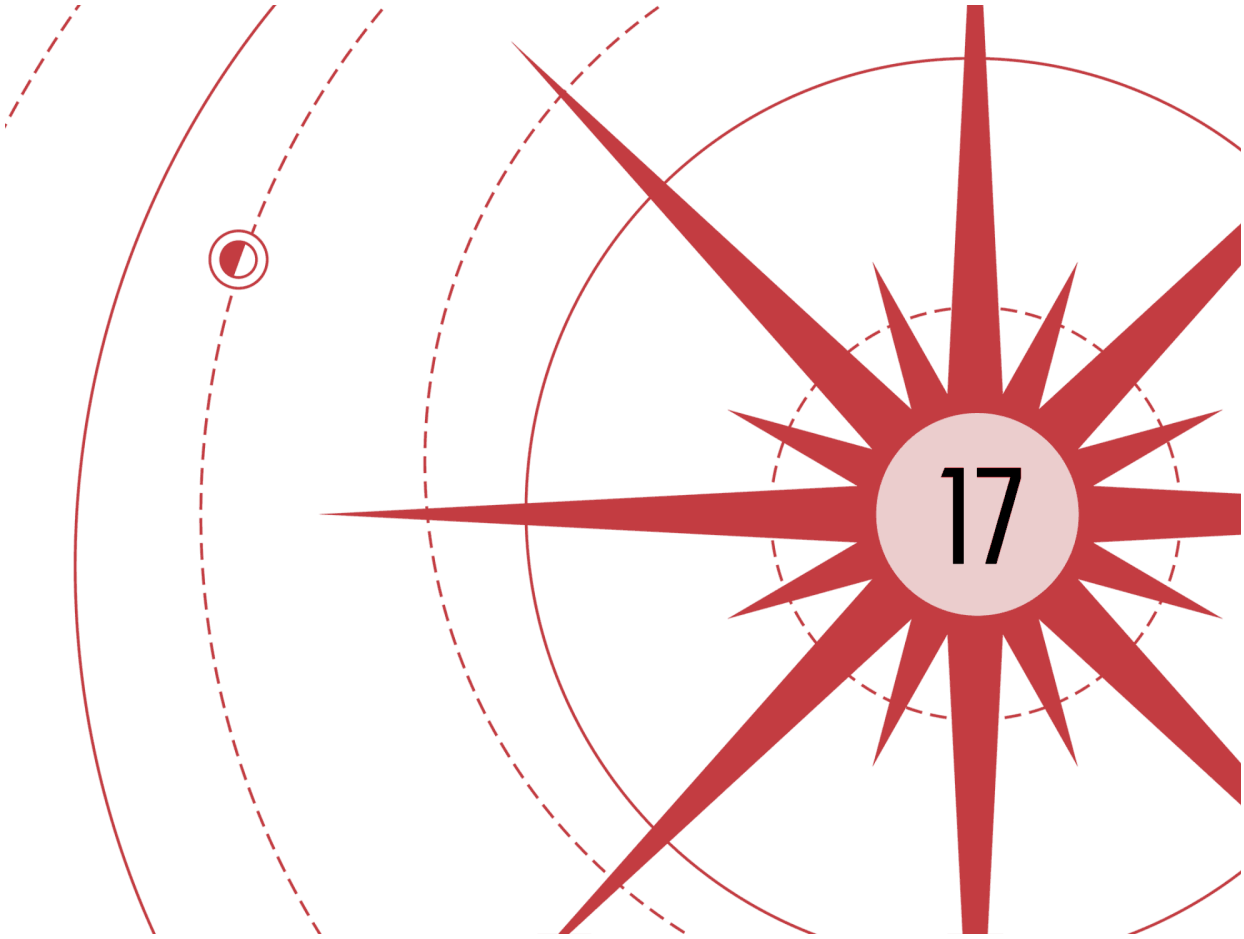
He was putting it together. Damnation.

“You should have kept reading,” Nomad said, pulling back the man’s attention. “It’s not compassion that drives me, Cinder Fool. It’s not ruthlessness either.” He took a pointed step forward—putting himself closer to the Cinder King, and toward the line of sight between the man and Rebeke. “I really do only want to get away. But there’s one thing you need to know about my people. You promised me *no tricks*. And you should *never* break an oath to a Rosharan.”

Nomad lunged to the side as the king focused again, his gun aimed at Rebeke. At the same time, Nomad formed Auxiliary into a metal ball in his hand.

The Cinder King fired.

And Nomad’s thrown sphere knocked the blast from the air in a shower of sparks.



NOMAD WASN'T TRULY faster than most projectiles.

He missed stunts like this one more often than not. It depended on how well he could position himself, and how soon he could ready a throw before the trigger was pulled. He'd once spent weeks training to deflect bullets and had only managed about one in ten.

Fortunately for Rebeke, today he was on point.

It made a compelling trick when he succeeded. Even more so here, with the blast exploding into a firework of light, throwing sparks.

"Idiot," Nomad said, summoning Auxiliary back into his hand as a simple metal sphere. "I was considering your offer—until you gave me a reason to look forward to killing you."

Those in the room gaped at him. Their moment of stunned disbelief gave him a chance to lunge and grab Rebeke. The two Charred immediately blocked the exits on either side, so he shoved her through the door into the pilot's station.

Before Nomad could follow, one Charred bodychecked him, slamming him against the wall with the Cinder King's treasure cabinet—including the tiny sunheart—causing the contents to rattle. Nomad turned and looked at this Charred; his face bore long red streaks, like someone had run burning pokers across his skin.

The Charred grinned and stepped back. Nomad reflexively raised his fists—then froze against his will. This let the enemy punch him three times in succession, dropping him with ease. Nomad slammed to the metal floor and groaned softly. But there wasn't time to stop and rest.

Never seemed like there was time for that. He pushed himself into a crouch and hurled himself to his feet, dodging past the Charred who tried to pile onto him. Nomad's quick steps brought him into the small control room with Rebeke.

He immediately slammed the door, then formed Auxiliary into a door guard. Clamps at the side fuzzed and locked onto the frame around the door as he pressed it into place. When the two Charred tried to shove the door open, they found themselves completely blockaded. Not that this wooden door would last long with armed people on the other side.

Rebeke backed into the cab's control panel. "Did you just *knock* a *bullet* from the *air*?" she asked.

Nomad grabbed the pilot's metal stool and threw it at the windshield, cracking it. Glass, contrary to a lot of his master's stories, was strong stuff. But the windshield rattled in its frame. Good enough.

"Nomad?" she asked as he threw the stool again, which bounced off this time, then they ducked as bullets began blasting through the door.

"Yes, I deflected a bullet," he said. "I can manage it about one in ten times. Get ready to run for my cycle."

"*One* in ten?" she said, growing paler.

"Fortunately you're the one. Pay attention!" Another shot came through the door. They assumed he'd somehow thrown the dead bolt and were trying to shoot the doorknob off.

Nomad jumped up onto the control panel and slammed his shoulder into the windshield, completely breaking it free of the frame. Together he fell with it outside, where he rolled to his feet and ran across the deck. Rebeke found her wits and scrambled out after him.

To his vast relief, he found the cycle where he'd left it. Yes, they'd docked it and chained it in place, but they didn't seem to have sabotaged it. Auxiliary, as a crowbar, let him pop the chain from where it had been

mounted to the deck. Rebeke climbed behind the controls and unlatched it from the side of the ship. Nomad leaped onto the seat behind her.

The Cinder King strode out of his cab, pistol in hand, firing wantonly—and Nomad blocked with a shield. A second later, Rebeke dove the cycle toward the ground, nearly tossing him off with the sudden acceleration. He managed to hang on with his knees and grip her around the waist with one arm, keeping his shield up and intercepting a few more shots as they descended.

"This is going to get awkward," he remarked in Alethi, "if they start shooting at the cycle and not me. Can you get a little bigger and protect the whole thing?"

You are at just over ten percent Skip capacity, the hero warns. I'll need some of that to grow. If we drop below ten percent, we won't be able to make new Connections, though you'll maintain the ones you made before.

"Do it," Nomad said, feeling Auxiliary grow weightier in his hand—feeding off the Investiture they'd gathered. He expanded to about five feet across, just in time to block more shots. That size increase wouldn't be permanent, and would continue to leech Investiture from Nomad while he remained that size.

Rebeke continued to dive, and he realized she was going for the other hovercycle. He could see the edge of it peeking out into the ringlight from the stone overhang below. Apparently the officers who had grabbed her had left it.

"Rebeke!" he shouted. "We need to get away!"

"These are one of the only sets of cycles we have!" she shouted back, turning her head so he could hear over the wind. "I'm not going to abandon one."

Nomad looked up. The Cinder King appeared at the edge of the deck above, his glowing eyes like the coals at the heart of a campfire. He held something else in his hand. The key?

The fake key. He slammed it and his pistol to the deck in obvious fury, then held out his hand to the side, where someone handed him a rifle. He took aim, and blast after blast hit the shield.

"Rebeke!" he yelled. "You might be low on cycles, but if you stop down there, he *is* going to pick us off from above. Do you understand?"

A moment passed, the cycle still screaming toward the ground. Then, with obvious frustration, she pulled up and shot them along the ground—leaving the other cycle behind, abandoned. The Cinder King took no further shots.

Indeed, Nomad thought he saw the man stalk back to his cabin, though the distance was now too great to be sure.

He has figured out, the knight conjectures, that the Beaconites replaced his key and are hunting for the doorway.

"You think?" Nomad grumbled in Alethi, dismissing the Investiture-draining shield, then called to Rebeke, "Trade me places."

"What?"

He forced her to slow, now that they were out of range, and let him take the driver's seat. There was barely enough room on the cycle for that, and as he got her on the back portion, she refused to hold him around the waist.

He frowned at her.

"We don't…touch," she said. "It's not comfortable for us."

"Even through clothing?" he demanded.

She looked away. "It just feels strange to—"

"Yeah, whatever. I don't care." He locked her in place by the legs with an improvised variation of Auxiliary's door blocker. Then he tore off toward the main body of Beaconites and fired up the radio. "Contemplation," he said, "we have a problem."

"Alas, my news is of a similar nature," she replied. "We've gone over the region twice and found nothing."

"He's been lying to you," he said, "about the location of the doorway. Obscuring it by making a big show of stopping in this region."

"As I explained previously, some of us have seen it."

"And how precise is their memory of the exact location? Did they memorize the positions of the stars? There are no persistent landmarks on this world. So—"

"So," she admitted, "those who saw the door could have been in a different location entirely. And it is reasonable, I admit that the coordinates we're relying upon could be a lie meant to confuse people, in case this very situation arose."

"Exactly," he said, leaning low against the wind. "I just had a chat with him. He's a tyrant, but fortunately for us, he's a stupid tyrant—with more ego than brains."

"Pardon, but you *chatted* with him?"

"Yeah. Long story."

It's really not, the knight observes. He stopped by. You flew up.

"That's not the long part of it," he said in Alethi. "The long part would be explaining why I flew up there." He continued in the local tongue.

“Contemplation, he knows. He’s figured out you swapped the keys.”

“Not to offend unduly, Sunlit—but did you tip him off to it by accident?”

“Think that if it makes you feel better,” he said, “but he didn’t need any help from me. I watched him piece it together—all he needed was the information that Beacon was searching this area and that you’d brought everyone from your city. He isn’t as smart as I first thought him, but even he could put two and two together.”

Contemplation was quiet over the line.

“Look,” Nomad said. “He’s gathering his forces and will be upon you soon. It’s time to pull out and retreat to the darkness.”

“If we retreat,” Contemplation said, “we will be dead before we can rotate to this position again.”

“If you don’t retreat, you’ll be dead a lot sooner. Doesn’t seem like a difficult decision to me.”

She sighed. “I’m just…so tired of running.”

“Lady,” he replied, “you have *no idea* how well I understand that.”

“I shall speak to the rest of the Greater Good,” she said, “and we shall decide. You have young Rebeke with you still, I hope.”

“I’ve got her,” he said. “She’s a tad stormy because I made her leave a cycle behind, but she’s in one piece—and has no extra holes in her.”

“It is well,” Contemplation said. “She may not be our Lodestar, but she is a symbol to this people now that her siblings are gone. I offer this request: endeavor not to get her killed. At least, not before the rest of us fall.”

She cut off, and Nomad was left to worry that they wouldn’t heed his warning. Fortunately, by the time he got back to the main body, they were organizing as he’d wished and moving back toward the darkness—which had moved pretty far off by that point. The horizon was growing brighter. Probably still an hour or so from full daylight, but he dipped his cycle lower anyway, to be deeper in the planet’s shadow.

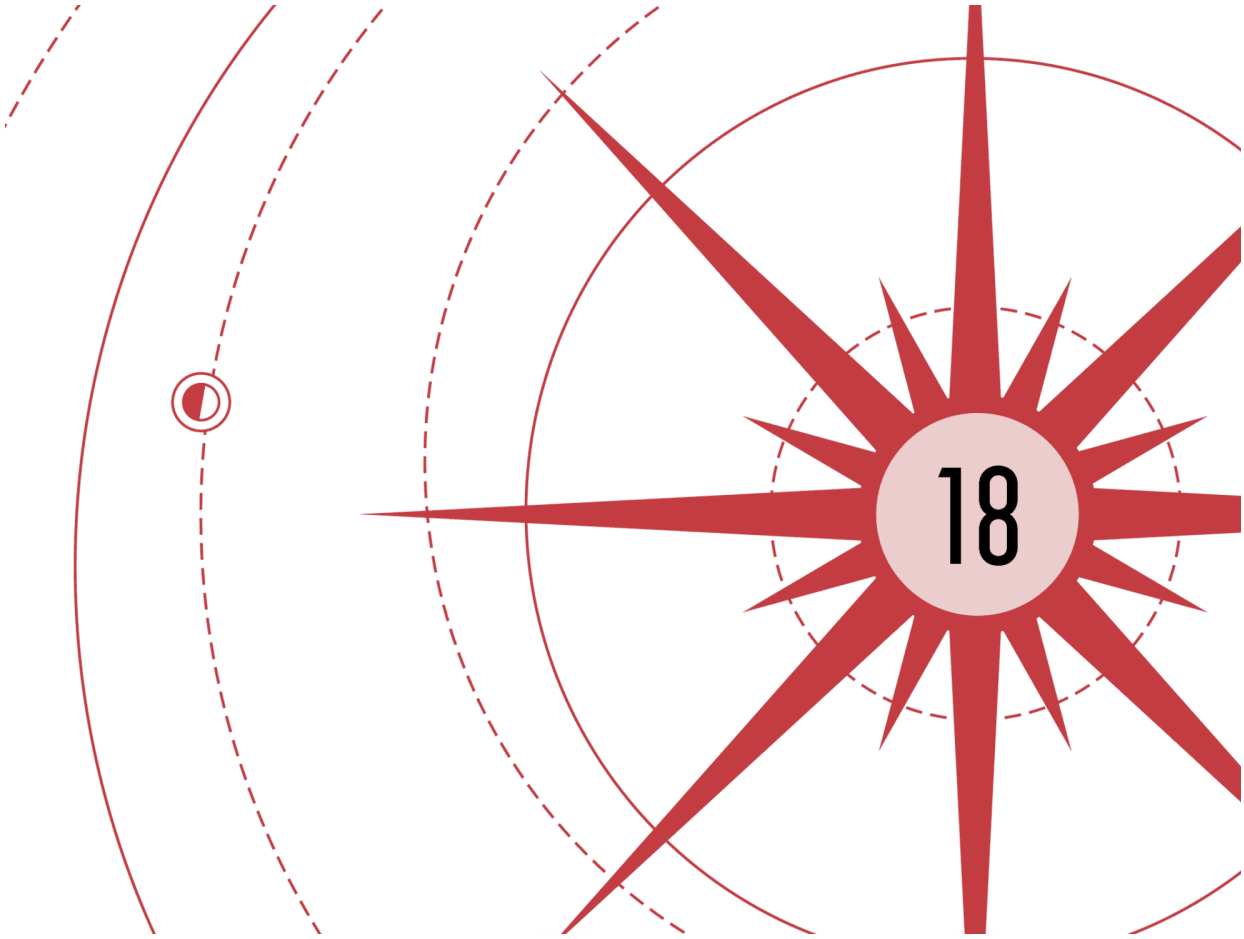
Down here, the plants were growing. Not as quickly as they’d been just on the edge of dawn, but the growth was perceptible. The landscape he’d left behind had been barren, full of mud and crags. This one was overgrown with life, moss on virtually every surface, grass waving in the winds, and it even bore small thickets of trees, their branches reaching toward the rings. It felt like an entirely different place; landmarks he’d noticed before leaving were now obscured by the foliage and deep greenery.

How did seeds survive the cataclysmic heat of the day? Storms. The plants on this world must be something extraordinary. And the animals? As

he zoomed past, he startled a group of gazelle-like creatures, who leaped up from feeding and bounded toward the darkness. Their eyes glowed faintly golden. Invested in some way.

He found the quadcycle's central fuselage where they'd left it, the other jets keeping it aloft. After locking the smaller one into place—and releasing Rebeke, who took over driving—they joined the rest of the ships, flying away from the sun in their ceaseless trek.

For a time, Nomad thought maybe they'd actually escaped. Then they reached the rim of the cloud cover, where even reflected sunlight didn't reach—and he saw something in the darkness beyond. A multitude of burning red lights. Seconds later, several dozen enemy ships zoomed out, on the attack.



"THEY WERE SEARCHING for us," Rebeke said. "While we were out here, they were in there, hunting for Beacon!"

She was right. The ships coming out of the darkness veered to the sides in surprise. They'd gotten orders to fly back to stop Beacon but hadn't expected to run into it so soon. For a few confusing minutes, chaos reigned. Both groups of ships broke up, swarming in all directions. Nomad's stomach tried to crawl up his esophagus as Rebeke dove toward the ground. The radio became a barking frenzy of questions and orders.

"To the east!" Contemplation's voice cut through it all. "Gather to the east. Make into the darkness and follow the Beacon!"

Rebeke veered that way, their engines burning a strip of ash through the plants beneath them, which whipped at Nomad's legs. He craned his neck, expecting to see weapon fire above. But there was practically none. Just a sharpshooter blast here and there.

He reminded himself that they didn't have guns mounted on their ships. Instead he saw a couple of enemy vessels bracket a blue-striped Beaconite ship and lock on either side, like they were docking. Soldiers leaped from the Cinder King's ships, rushing the Beaconite's cockpit.

Before he'd found his Torment, he'd lived on a world without firearms. Back there, they'd engaged in a more personal, brutal kind of combat—the kind where you were forced to watch the other fellow die as you found the most efficient way of separating his blood from his body.

This conflict felt more like naval warfare on his homeworld: no cannons, no artillery, just ramming and boarding. It was cumbersome, but it made sense here, since capturing a ship was among the most constructive things you could do, simultaneously shrinking the enemy force and enlarging your own. In addition, the Cinder King's military strength relied on the Charred, who were most effective in close-up combat.

Nomad, the knight says, look up, fifty degrees to your left.

He followed the directions to a ship bobbing in the air, beleaguered by a large enemy ship locked onto it—and that enemy ship was boosting away from the darkness at full thrust. Like many of the Beaconite ships, the captured one was more a flying house than a military vessel, and it couldn't counter the enemy ship's greater power. It was being towed away.

That's the one that we met the Greater Good in, the knight notes to the squire's confused lack of understanding.

"Damnation. You sure?"

Unfortunately.

"Don't suppose these people know to separate their command staff on different vessels, do they?"

Seems like the sort of thing you only learn from sad experience…

He sighed as Rebeke wove and dodged. The enemy ships ignored him; they were after larger prey, bearing more people.

Well?

"Thinking," Nomad said, "on whether or not it's too late to go back to the Cinder King and take him up on his offer."

I'm glaring at you right now.

"You don't have eyes."

Which is why I have to explain it.

Nomad sighed, then tapped Rebeke on the shoulder and pointed at the ship in question. She looked in time to see two Charred leaping onto it, their

open-fronted robes rippling as they soared. He lost what Rebeke said next to the wind, but her expression was horrified.

"Get me close!" Nomad shouted. "And be ready to pull me out in case I need it. Try not to get captured this time!"

She nodded, pulling up in another jarring maneuver. Unfortunately a fleeing Beaconite vessel roared across their vector. Many of them were doing a good job of avoiding capture—that *was* something they had experience with. Still, Rebeke had to bank sharply left and then right to get back on track toward the Greater Good's ship.

He noted another vessel coming up to their right—between him and the command ship.

"This is your fault, Aux," he muttered.

Rebeke belatedly saw she was on a collision course and veered to the side. He used the momentum to launch himself straight off the back of the cycle, hitting hard on the ship coming their direction.

He glimpsed confused people in the cockpit as he rolled across their deck, then barely got purchase and threw himself out over an expanse, almost missing the side of the Greater Good's ship as it was towed in the other direction. He heaved himself up onto its deck, which was maybe ten feet across.

The enemy ship was still docked on the other side, hijacking the command ship's own thrust, piloted by one of the white-coated officers. The woman saw him, eyes going wide. She frantically fumbled with her rifle.

Her ill preparation gave him a chance, so he dashed across the deck and tried to tackle her—but of course, his Torment decided *that* would be too easy. It froze his muscles, sending him tripping in an embarrassing mess on the deck.

"That is *storming* annoying," he muttered, barely getting Aux up as a shield in time to block the rifle shots.

Didn't you have an idea to deal with that?

"Yes, but it will take time to put together," he said, backing away from the rifle fire. He eventually got even with the command ship's front window—but that had been covered by a blast shield. As the officer stopped to reload, he formed Auxiliary as a crowbar and got the cover off in a single heave, sending the metal panel clanging to the deck. Then he threw himself shoulder first at the window behind it.

And bounced off.

"What is it with these people and their windows!" he said, this time throwing Auxiliary through first as a large barbell.

Don't know, the knight replies as he smashes through the window with ease. Must be you.

Nomad grunted as bullets blasted the wall beside him, then hurled himself through and came up in a roll to his feet, out of sight of the riflewoman. Inside here, though, the two Charred from earlier were terrorizing the three Greater Good, who had pulled back to the far side of the room behind an overturned table. He saw their wizened heads peeking out as he stood up dramatically before the broken window. And wished to Damnation itself that he had any idea what to do next.

At least now the Charred turned their focus on him. They came in together, armed with batons. Fortunately the Cinder King took people captive so he could use them to make sunhearts, which explained his preference for batons instead of swords.

Unfortunately there were two of them, and they were *fast*. They descended upon him in a flurry of blows and growls, forcing him to block with a shield in a series of quick exchanges. He couldn't even try to force them back without being frozen by his own stupid soul, so he went full defensive—never a good way to win a fight. He had to ignore when they overextended their attacks, and he couldn't punish their frenzied barrage, which otherwise would have left them open to counterstrikes.

Instead he took hits on the arm, then the side, then a *devilish* crack on the head that sent him stumbling into the corner, vision swimming.

The knight hopes that his beleaguered squire has a plan.

"I've got one," he muttered, blocking another set of blows, then barely shoving himself out of the corner to escape being pinned there. "I jump back out the window. Maybe the Beaconites don't *really* need the help of these old ladies."

Of course, the knight says. Leave them without leadership and without supplies. That will work out well, I'm sure.

The two Charred—fueled by their Investiture, thus needing no pause for breathers—backed him into the *other* corner, beating him with relentless attacks.

Nomad? Auxiliary's voice was the same monotone as always. He couldn't manage anything else. Yet Nomad thought he could sense his friend's concern by the lack of a quip. *This is going to require a lot of healing. I'm barely keeping your body moving…*

A moment later the door slammed open, and the enemy pilot—the woman with the white coat—came in to help the Charred, rifle held at the ready. Well. That would do.

Nomad took another mean hit to the shoulder as he forced his way out of the corner. That left him open, though, and one of the Charred rushed him from behind, slamming him into the pilot. It wasn't his fault, therefore, that the collision sent her tumbling—and the Torment liked it when he kicked her gun away. No need for that.

From there, he made certain to keep the attention of the Charred, giving them a challenging smile—but swaying on his feet, tempting them with his weakness. In return, they redoubled their efforts, pounding on him, getting around his shield—all too easy in a fight of two against one. They hit him with a series of blows that caused him to lower the shield and expose his face to—

One of the Charred's heads exploded.

The other froze, then spun as Contemplation—standing in front of the table—unloaded shot after shot into his chest. She strode forward, black-dyed hair tumbling around her stocky figure, firing until she dropped the second Charred in a mess of smoldering embers and burned flesh.

Nomad dropped to his knees, gasping for breath as Contemplation pointed her rifle at the pilot, who raised her hands in response.

"Glad you can shoot," Nomad muttered.

"Did my share of hunting as a youth," the old woman replied. "Haven't held a rifle in years. Why did you kick it to me instead of grabbing it yourself?"

"Personal challenge," he said, flopping back onto the ground, eyes squeezed closed at the cumulative pain of his wounds. "I hate hogging the glory. Maybe one of you could get out there and shut down the ship pulling us the wrong way?"

He lost track of the next part. He didn't fall completely unconscious, but he retreated into himself as his body healed. He sensed they'd done as he'd asked because the ship started moving the right way again. He dragged himself to the corner and convalesced quietly there.

Over the next hour, he listened with half an ear as Confidence—the tall, spindly one—directed the escape operation from the radio. Auxiliary healed him, but quietly warned that he was under nine percent Skip capacity.

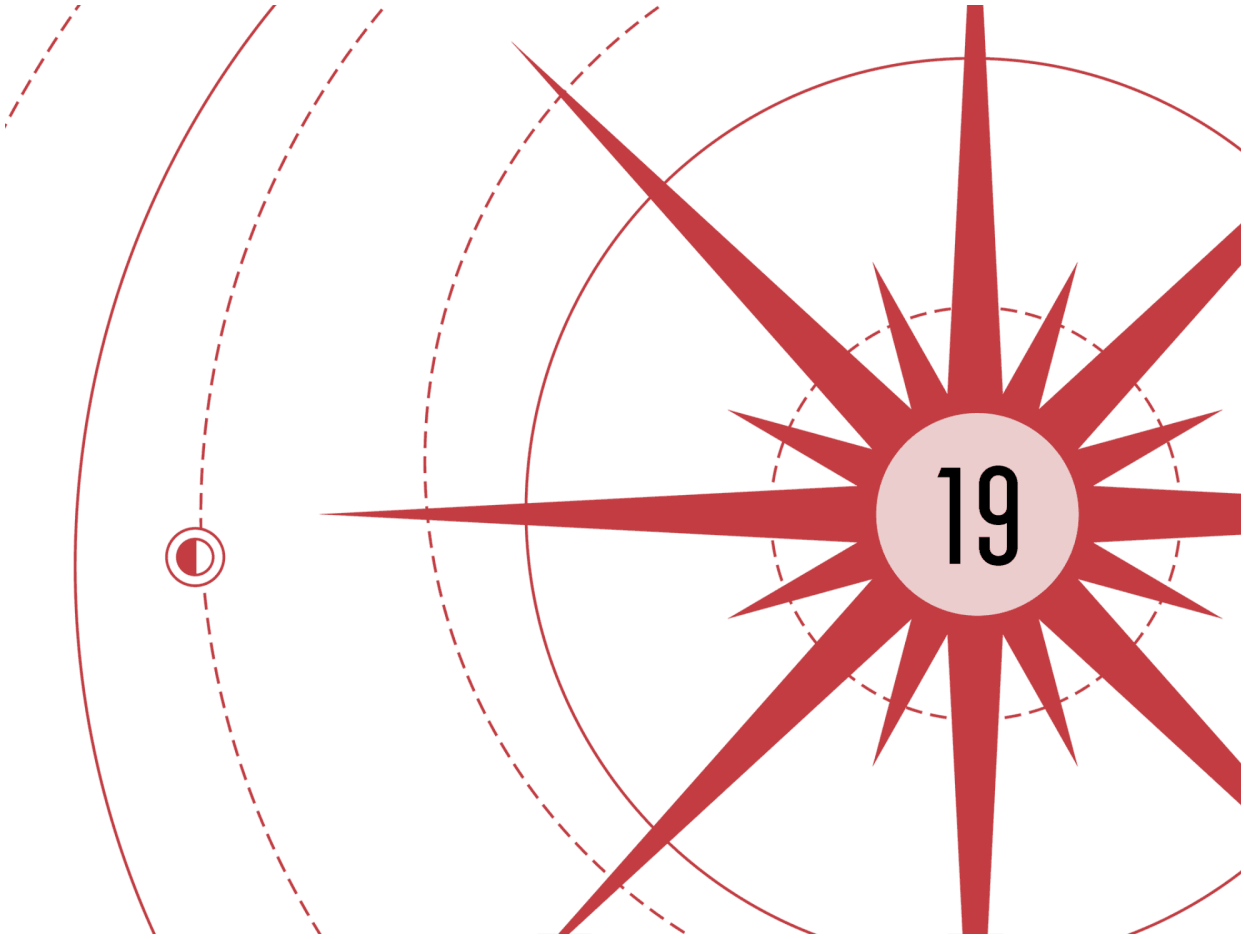
Sometime in there, Rebeke joined them. The light through the broken window grew dark as they fled.

He bore the pain with closed eyes. His body could take a great deal of punishment, thanks to the Torment's gifts. But even he needed a breather now and then. Especially after taking a beating that would have killed anyone else.

Still, he paid enough attention to hear worry in Confidence's voice as she directed the others. It seemed many of the Beaconites had escaped—and with their Beacon itself, they could guide everyone. But they were pressed and harried by the Cinder King's forces, who made them veer away from the path they wanted to take.

From what he gathered, they were forced to swerve to the south, entering a different "corridor" entirely. That was, so far as he understood, the local way of talking about certain latitudes. Each band of latitude was a corridor, with no actual geographic features to distinguish them—except that going too far north or south was dangerous.

Well, at least they had escaped. At least they were alive. Who cared if they were in another corridor? It couldn't be *that* bad. Could it?



THEY DIDN'T DISTURB him lying there on the floor—as they reformed Beacon and took casualty reports. Fifteen people captured. Ten percent of their population dragged off, to be left for the sun.

Eventually more officials arrived. He knew the three members of the Greater Good, along with Zeal—the little person who was, as best Nomad could determine, their approximation of a field commander or special ops planner. Also in attendance was Jeffrey Jeffrey—the man with the bushy black beard. As a sort of city steward or administrator, he had served under various incarnations of the Greater Good, offering continuity to a leadership trio that was usually made up of three old men or women in the months before they were turned into power sources.

Five other people joined in that he didn't know. Together, they convened to take stock after the disastrous attempt to find their legendary Refuge.

Auxiliary found it *hilarious* that they just left Nomad there. Lying on the floor, dozing. Like he was a sleeping dragon, dangerous to disturb.

Look how they arrange their chairs, the hero exclaims. Look, see it, Nomad. They don't dare scoot back, lest they bump you. Why don't they hold the meeting in another location? Or…you know…move you to a bed?

Nomad probably had one of his faces on. The one that said, "Don't touch me. I'm thinking about who to murder next, and I'm accepting volunteers."

Eventually the group started to discuss the real issue.

"We're dead," Confidence said, rising to speak. He could identify the tallest of the Greater Good from her voice, and pictured the spindly woman glaring at them all. "It is time to make our peace with Adonalsium."

"Pardon my brusqueness," a man Nomad hadn't met said, "but you are supposed to be the optimistic one! If it pleases you, give us hope."

"My title is Confidence," she replied. "My duty is to express what I know to be true with utmost energy of heart. It is not my duty to lie. I see no way out."

"We've been forced into an untenable corridor," Compassion agreed quietly. "This region has seen mountains for the last five years. We will soon encounter the heights. Beyond that, we haven't enough heat in our sunhearts to fly for much longer. We've divided them, shared them, and stretched the limits of our rationing."

"Even if we all gathered onto a few ships," Confidence said, "we won't last another rotation. We've gone too long without harvesting. After being driven off from one attempt, then abandoning the next, we're running on cold souls."

"Must we…surrender to the Cinder King?" Jeffrey Jeffrey asked softly.

Zeal pounded the table. "I'd rather die a cold death and leave my soul to light only the mud than give myself to *him*. Our souls would just further enforce his tyranny."

"Then what?" Compassion asked.

The entire room seemed to look toward Contemplation. Nomad cracked an eye to study her. With no hat and her hair back up in a black bun, she stood out even in a room full of people in similar clothing.

"Contemplation?" Compassion asked again. "You have a plan, surely?"

"I…can think of no plan," Contemplation admitted, "other than to die with pride, knowing we separated ourselves from that monster and fought him until the end. Elegy would be…proud to know that we never folded."

The room fell absolutely silent. Nomad decided it was time to make his entrance. Er, his, already-here-ance. He planned one of his master's grand

speeches, the type that really roused people. But before he could rise and make it, the people in the room started standing.

"We go on," one said.

"We go on," another replied.

Nomad sat up, watching them each stand, gathering strength from the others. They didn't need his speech, he realized. This group was tough as carapace. They didn't need something to rally or galvanize them. And today…they didn't even need a soldier.

They needed something he had once been. They needed someone who could fix problems.

Storms. Could he be that man for them? Did it matter? Even if he somehow got them to the entrance…it wouldn't save them. Still, he found their air of defiance more intoxicating than the Cinder King's liquor. And if there was something left of the man he'd been, it was a severe loathing for bullies—particularly those who picked on the defenseless.

So he stood up, joining them all. They turned, looking up at him, making way for him to approach the Greater Good's table. There, he pressed his hands down flat on the wood. "That bastard," he said, "broke his oath to me."

The three gawked at him.

"…And?" Contemplation said. "He's a murderer and a tyrant. Of *course* he is an oath breaker too."

"I don't really care about the rest," Nomad said. "But the Cinder King made it personal…so I'm going to kill him. I'd prefer to topple his kingdom before I go—as a parting gift."

"We would love to hand you that opportunity," Confidence said. "But I don't think you understand the seriousness of our problem. We've been forced into an untenable corridor—one with blockages preventing forward motion."

"We fly back out," Nomad said. "Hide in the darkness again."

"We've sent scouts," Zeal said from behind. "The Cinder King has posted guards and scouts *all along* our northern flank—he must have called up all of his subjects to send him ships! If we try to go back to the north, he will catch us."

"We're trapped here," Compassion whispered. "Enemies to the north, and mountains to the south and to the east."

"Mountains?" Nomad frowned. "Rebeke said something about this…but remind me. I thought the landscape rearranged each rotation. How are there

mountains?"

"Some larger features remain," Zeal explained. "There are always mountains at the poles, and those regions cannot be traveled. Sometimes they form in other places—and the ones in this region have been here for years now." He looked to the others, and his voice softened. "When they first rose, two entire cities were destroyed. I've scouted and tried to get through several times—to no avail. Originally Elegy thought that maybe if we could make this corridor tenable, we'd be able to escape the Cinder King."

"The mountains do melt and reform," Contemplation added. "But I offer this truth, Sunlit. Something about the core of our planet creates highlands here, and they are utterly impassable."

"I mean, we have flying ships," Nomad said. "We could go *over* them."

"Oh, *over* them!" Zeal said, smacking his forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"I offer this explanation to your ignorance," Contemplation said. "Our engines cut out if we go too high. They roar and try, but we do not move—and then they die. Beyond that, people go unconscious if they spend more than a few minutes in the heights."

"Wait, how tall *are* these mountains?" Nomad asked.

"Tall," Zeal said. "At least a thousand feet."

A thousand feet? Like a single thousand?

At first, he assumed that the Connection had stopped working, and he hadn't interpreted those words correctly. These people were stymied by a set of "mountains" that would barely be considered hills on his homeworld? He'd lived in a city at over fifteen thousand feet elevation, back there.

And yet he wouldn't call them fools. Naive, maybe, but not idiots…

I'm lost, the knight says with an air of bafflement, commensurate with his solemn, dignity-ravaging intelligence. Am I understanding this right? What's going on?

"Math," Nomad realized. "Math is going on." He switched to their tongue. "Someone get me a pad of paper and something to write with."

When they resisted, he glared at them until someone who had been taking notes proffered the implements. A woman brought him a chair, and he settled down, rubbing his forehead. Writing came easily to him these days—strange to think that ability had once been considered unseemly to some back home.

He sketched out some equations, dredging far, far back—to a person he used to be. He thought through the way the hovercycles worked, picturing their engines. His best guess was that the engine mechanism somehow used

Investiture from these sunhearts to superheat the air, then sent it out those jets on the bottoms, providing upward thrust. Essentially their hovercraft relied on downward-pointing jet engines rather than lift from wings.

"Propellant," he muttered. "That's the problem. Up above, the air gets too thin to act as a propellant for your ships. Remarkable…"

The people slowly gathered around, and if they seemed shocked to see complex mathematics produced by their "Sunlit Man," a killer with a sour attitude…well, he didn't blame them one bit.

"What does this all mean?" Contemplation asked softly as he wrote.

"Your planet is really small," he said. "Like, almost *comically* small. It takes how long to complete a rotation again?"

"Around twenty hours," Contemplation said.

"Hmm. Give me a clock."

They provided one, and he was able—using his own internal sense of time—to do some vague reckoning. Their hours were shorter than his by roughly half. Factoring it in…yeah, that gave him something to work with.

He guessed their day was maybe ten hours galactic standard. The planet was small, and turned slowly enough that people could keep up in ordinary aircraft. He figured it was possible to fly all the way around in just four hours. Except you couldn't. You had to wait for the planet to turn, because if you got too far ahead, you ran straight into the sunlight.

Calculating that—with some measurements he demanded from the others—he arrived at the planet's diameter. From there, the answers lined up. He'd been fooled at first, since the gravity felt roughly similar to what he knew back home. Less than most worlds, but still within common ranges. He could test that with a few dropped objects. Regardless, that initial gut impression had given him a false sense that he understood the physics of the world. In reality, he had been way off.

"Most worlds with this kind of gravity," he explained, "are much bigger. You've got something dense at your core—Invested, I'd say, since no natural element could create this kind of a gravitational pull and leave the planet livable.

"Your atmosphere also seems to thin at an alarming rate. From my estimation, a thousand feet up, and you're well into the death zone. No wonder you only hover your ships thirty or forty feet in the air."

He looked up to a circle of blank faces.

I'm raising my hand, the knight says. You can't see it, but I am. Call on me.

"Okay…" Nomad said in Alethi.

Can I go take an art class instead, teacher?

"Auxiliary, you're *literally* a living manifestation of physical forces—sharing substance with the concepts of gravitation and the interaxial force. You should know about this stuff."

Uh, right. And just because you're made of meat and various strange liquids, every human is born knowing all about primate anatomy.

"Well, it would be a good idea to pay attention anyway," Nomad said, though admittedly he felt foolish saying it. If he'd paid better attention himself, he'd have figured this out earlier. The curvature of the planet, the low air pressure at ground level…these things were blazing signals of the planet's size.

He switched back to the local language. "Look. It makes perfect sense that your engines give out as they try to cross mountains. These ships move via the displacement of air."

"If it pleases you to be contradicted," Contemplation said, "they fly using sunhearts."

"Yes and no," he said. "You fly using engines powered by sunhearts as a fuel source—you could be running on *coal* and stay aloft, if you could somehow compensate for the weight of such a large furnace and heavy fuel. What makes ships like this move, though, is propellant and not fuel. You know, pushing something out to give you thrust upward? Air in this case? No?"

They gave him blank stares.

"How," he said, "can you fly advanced ships like these and have no grasp of basic aviation science? Fluid dynamics? The law of motion and countermotion?"

More blank stares. Except for one woman at the side. A few looked to her. A mechanic or an engineer, he guessed. She dressed like the others, but had oil stains on her gloves.

"I can grasp *some* of this, Sunlit," she said, staring at the numbers he'd written. "But you've got to understand. We're refugees among refugees. The Cinder King has scientists who might be able to understand what you're saying, but even they focus on keeping the cities moving.

"We don't have the time, the resources, the *lives* to waste in theorizing. We use what works. We can keep it running, replicate it, but…" She shrugged. "We just can't afford to think lofty thoughts when mortality looms on the horizon."

He could respect that. Storms, he *felt* it himself. How much time had *he* had for dreaming since he'd been on the run?

"All of this," Confidence said, waving at the equations he'd written out, "confirms what we already knew—that if we go too high, the engines stop working and we suffocate?"

You should tell her, the knight interjects, that is basically the entire point of math. Explaining stuff everyone already knows.

Some days he wished he'd bonded a Cryptic.

"Indeed, it tells us what we know, Confidence," he said. "But more usefully it tells us *why*. Which is the first step to fixing any problem."

"And can you fix this one?" Contemplation said. "In less than ten hours? Because that's when we're going to encounter those highlands."

Ten of their hours. Could he fix a problem like this in that amount of time?

Impossible.

"Absolutely," he said. "I'll need some things, not the least of which being access to whatever fabrication machines you have. Rebeke said you can make new ship parts from raw materials?"

"Yes," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "We can."

"Good. I need access to that, a quiet room, some tools, and…the Charred we captured. Rebeke's sister. For certain tests of a relevant nature."

They didn't question him. Good. He was still working on a way to escape his Torment, and he wanted a test subject to try out his theories on. Smart scientists did *not* experiment on themselves.

"Wait," Confidence said. "Even if a miracle occurs and we get over the mountain, we're still as good as dead. What about our dwindling power supply?"

"We'll find a way to get more," Nomad said.

"And the Cinder King?" she demanded. "The overwhelming forces we're facing? The fact that we keep losing people to his attacks, day after day? What is our objective here? What are you trying to accomplish, other than kill him? What is *our* final objective?"

"That's up to you," Nomad said. "I want to find that door. I'll do what I can to get you over those mountains, then get power to keep you going another day. Then we'll be back in this area and we can search again." He shrugged.

"That again?" Confidence said. "You yourself said that door wouldn't help us."

"I…" He trailed off.

She had a point.

"Peace, Confidence," Compassion said. The old woman, with ebony skin and tight curls of white hair, seemed so frail in her seat. She needed help to walk, and her voice wavered as she spoke. And yet there was a strength to her. The strength of someone who had bowed to the years, but not yet surrendered to them. A strength he understood, and respected.

"We were just," Compassion continued, "making our affirmations to die rather than return to the Cinder King. Is this not at least a tiny hope more than that? Our ancestors came to this land and survived against all reason and possibility. Do we not owe it to them to attempt whatever survival we can imagine, no matter how dim?"

"We searched the entire region," Confidence said, "and didn't find the door."

"It's near the place we looked," Compassion said. "It must be. We will find out where, and search there instead."

"And if the Refuge truly is just a myth?" Confidence asked. "If it's not real and never has been, as this man implies?"

The others fell silent.

"We need a miracle," Zeal whispered, standing up from his chair. "And I live for those, Greater Good. Even without the mountains…even if we had sunhearts…our path would be one of death without a dream. Without a dream, he will wear us down eventually and destroy us, no matter what we do. So yes, I'd prefer to trust a myth, Confidence. Instead of just stopping and embracing the sun."

Others nodded, and Nomad's stomach twisted. He looked down. Earlier, he'd been bolstered by their confidence, but now he found it strangely condemning. Of him, and the false opportunity his presence offered.

Try to believe, he thought to himself, *like they do. Try to pretend, at least, there is a hope for them. Who knows? You've been wrong before.*

"We're going to do it," he promised them, looking up. "We're going to cross those mountains and fly all the way around this cursed planet. We're going to loop back to where we started. And this time, we're going to *open* that doorway. It's better than lying down and dying."

"It is," Contemplation agreed. "Is that why you keep running?"

"So far," he said.

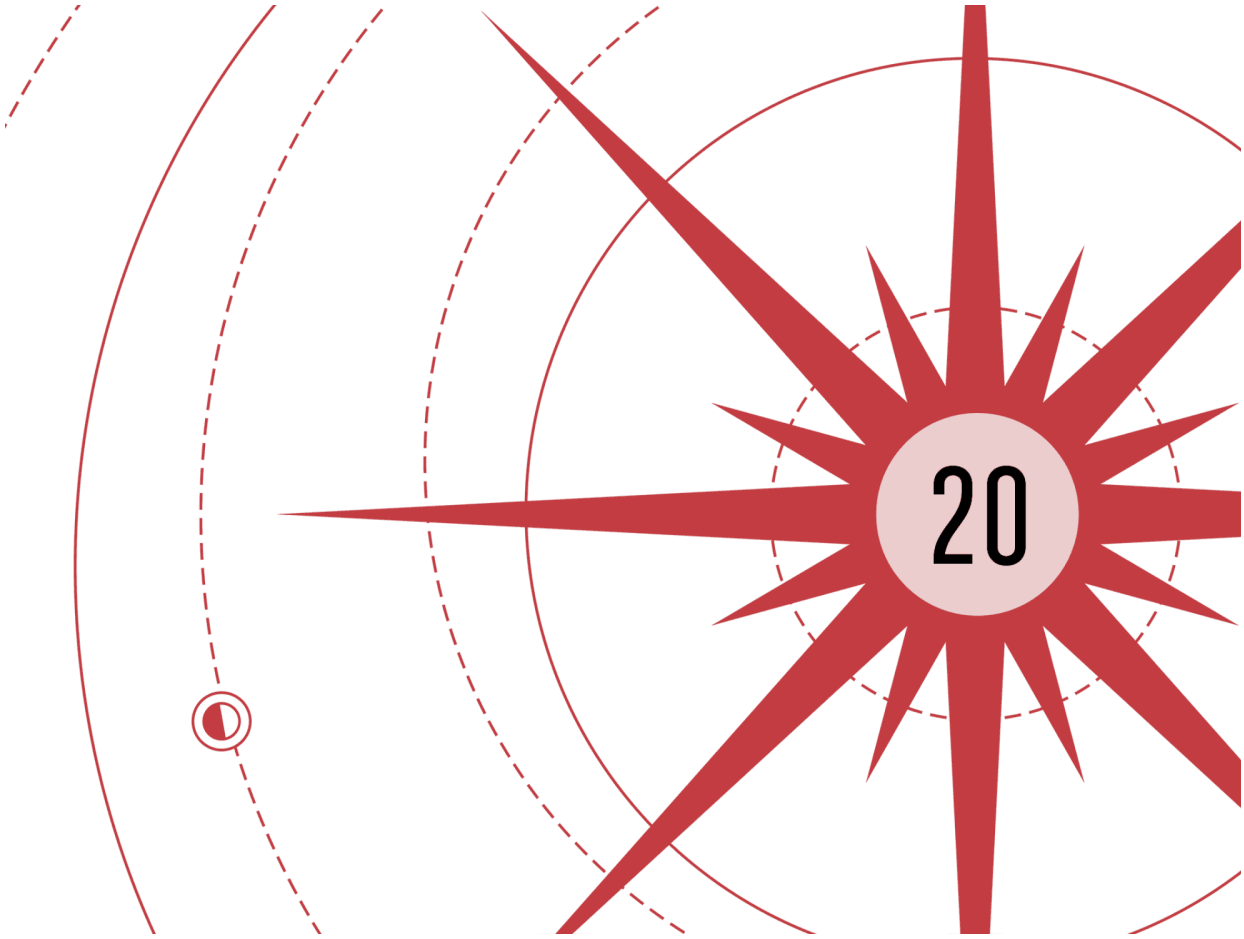
Confidence sat and nodded to herself. And he realized that perhaps she'd been playing a role. Expressing her true feelings, yes, but also offering the

argument that needed to be made—so it could be refuted. Pushing them to a solution by vocalizing the fears they all felt, giving them shape, and letting them be neutralized.

"We'll do it," Compassion whispered. "For our children. For our families. For ourselves."

Great. Now he just had to reengineer the basis of their aviation technology—retrofitting the engines of an entire city to work in a near-vacuum environment—in just a few hours.

He'd rather get beaten up again, because this would require the old him. The one who had failed so many times.



THEY GAVE HIM a little room near the center of the city. He found it… comfortably small. Like a workshop, with a wall for pinning notes above a utilitarian desk and a pull-out cot in the corner. Though hardly grand, there was a pleasant lived-in quality to the space that he liked.

They soon brought him a small engine, taken from one of the hovercycles, and placed it on the workbench. It was only the size of a large melon. After that, they brought Elegy, dragging her by her arms, which were chained together at the wrists.

He hadn't seen the Charred since helping "rescue" her during that initial escape. A group of six men worked to chain her to the wall as she struggled. He studied her in more detail, seated at his desk. She appeared to be in her late thirties. There was one ember mark glowing on her left cheek, and her silvery black hair was cut short. Like her sister, she had light green eyes, and she gave him plenty of opportunities to see them as she raged against her captors.

The men finally left, several nursing wounds from being kneed or elbowed. Even in chains, this woman was dangerous. Her ember—glowing from the ashen cavity of her chest, where her heart should have been—flared dramatically as she fought against the chains. If she hadn't been so Invested—the power reinforcing her very skin and muscles—she would have injured herself in her furious attempts to rip free.

"This was her room, once," Contemplation said from the doorway. "I had hoped it might spark some kind of memory…"

From the way Elegy resisted, he doubted it was doing anything. Still, the fact that it had been her place indicated he'd have liked this woman, had she not been burned until only the ashes of her soul remained.

"Why do you want her?" Contemplation asked.

"I need to understand your power sources," Nomad said. "These sunhearts…they aren't quite like anything I've seen on any other planet." He nodded to Elegy. "She has one right in her core. I want to run a few tests."

"Will they hurt her?"

"I can't promise either way," he said. "But I don't expect them to."

Contemplation nodded thoughtfully, her dark hair smoothed into a beehive, making her seem taller than she was. "There are those among us," she finally said, "who will be mightily upset with you if anything unfortunate happens to Elegy."

He nodded. "You're not one of those, though?"

"I knew Elegy well," Contemplation said. "I spoke for her many times during the months she encouraged our rebellion. Once I was named to the Greater Good, I voted to name her to the position of Lodestar. An appointed position, the one who navigates a city along its route. For us, it was more than just that—it was a person to offer plans. We are the city's leaders, but she was its heart. We followed her vision." She nodded toward the woman chained to the wall. "That thing isn't Elegy. You can't hurt her, Sunlit. She's already dead."

Then Contemplation stepped toward him, removed the glove from her hand, and held it up, palm forward. She seemed to expect something from him. Hesitant, he put his hand up before hers—but did not touch.

"You draw nothing?" she said.

"I'm led to believe," he said, "that it's not good etiquette to take heat from others."

"Unless it's offered," Contemplation said, nodding to her hand. "This is an act of thanks for us, Sunlit. A display of vulnerability and willingness to

trust. You saved my life, through great pain and risk. Thank you."

So with that explanation, he pressed his palm to hers. "Your Breath become mine," he whispered, trying a Command to see if he could draw out her heat. It didn't work, of course. But it had been worth a shot, and besides, the ceremony meant something to her.

She grew teary-eyed. "When you burst through that window," she said, "I knew you were him. A Sunlit Man of the stories. I knew it again when you offered us hope to continue our eternal pilgrimage."

"I'm not what you think, Contemplation," he said. "I'm *really* not. But right now, if it will keep you all moving, then you can call me whatever you storming want."

The elderly woman smiled. "I'm pleased I got to see you." She retreated then, leaving him alone with a glowing madwoman. Well, that and his semifunctional conscience.

Do you really think you can do this? the hero asks, dubious but curious.

Nomad settled down at the desk, but continued watching Elegy, who had stopped thrashing and instead devoted herself to glaring at him. "I think," he said to Auxiliary, "that I don't have any other options. Fortunately they have the difficult part solved."

They do?

He opened a blank notebook. "Sure. They have a compact, powerful, renewable energy source. Something most developing societies can only dream about. *That's* difficult. Travel has always been about the power supply. Creating energy—well, releasing it—is easy. Just throw a match into a pile of dried-out wood and you'll see that. But harnessing it? Making it *portable*? That's the problem."

If it's so easy, Auxiliary replied as Nomad started writing and sketching, *then what happens when they get into those mountains? Why do their engines stop working?*

"The engines don't stop working," he said. "They keep right on releasing energy, but there's nothing for them to *do* with it. Most conventional travel involves one basic principle: equal and opposite reactions. From jet engines to horse-drawn carriages, it's all about the primary laws of motion."

And a jet engine needs air to provide thrust?

"Yes," he said. "It's more complicated, but in general, a jet engine works by forcing air through a small nozzle. In most cases, it's superheated air that has passed through a turbine, and the resulting *thrust* is what moves the ship. Air shooting out the back of the engine."

So…no more air…no more thrust?

"Exactly," he said, pointing at the small engine. "I suspect these sides here are air intakes. They draw in a great deal of it, then the sunheart superheats it in this structure here—some kind of compressor—maybe even generates *plasma*, which would be wild. Look at this. See these nozzles in here? That's where the superheated air—and perhaps even some Investiture turned to raw energy—bursts out. That gives us the lift and the fiery glow we see."

And what about space flight, where there is no air? How do other ships do it?

That was still relatively new. Well, the science was old, depending on which parts of the cosmere you visited. But few had ever experimented with it until the last hundred years or so. Why take all the effort to travel the void of space when there were easier ways to travel between planets?

Trick was, most of those were slow, usually involving months or even years of walking through another dimension. You could fly there too, but could only get out at specific points. Faster methods that could go anywhere were just starting to be explored, but they were proportionally more difficult in their own ways. Either that, or they had some storming terrible side effects. His own experience proved that.

Even so, more and more people in the cosmere inched toward understanding the difficult, but plausible, methods that had been out of reach until scientific practicality matched theoretical dreaming.

"For space flight," he said to Aux's question, "you usually bring your own propellant. A rocket engine will often mix a fuel and an oxidizer—but the point is that the mass of those two is ejected from the back of the engine at high speed. Mass and energy expelled out the back makes *you* go forward. These sunheart-powered engines don't carry fuel with them."

So we do that.

"How much liquid oxygen you got handy?" he asked. "How about kerosene? Rocket fuel is not common stuff, Aux. I doubt we could put anything together in time, and I know of no sources of zephyr aether on this planet. Do you?"

Then…we're ruined?

"No," he said, beginning work on a diagram. "They've got plenty of one thing: water. It's pounding on the rooftop right now. Plus they have, as I said, the hard part in hand: supercompact, energy-rich fuel. It can heat things without needing oxygen. So if we get a boiler working and steam jets coming out the bottom…"

Wait. You're going to power space flight with a steam engine?

"I guess I am," he said. "Though I'd call it high-atmosphere flight rather than proper space flight. Anyway, you'd be surprised how many modern sources of energy rely on the same principle. The problem with traditional steam engines—well, one of the big ones—has always been the fact that the fuel is outrageously bulky and heavy. Not practical for much beyond a large-scale engine on rails with a lot of towing capacity. I'm telling you, though, this is how all motion works."

All motion? the knight asks hesitantly. What about when we'd fly together in the past?

Nomad froze. That *had* been different. He'd misspoken, of course. Not all motion was due to the factors he'd indicated. There were other kinds, like fundamental laws of attraction. One body to another. Forces that held all matter together, at the level of the axon.

"That was different," he admitted.

I used to love that, Aux said. *Before…*

Nomad breathed out heavily, squeezing his eyes shut.

It wasn't your fault.

"I said yes to Hoid. And I bonded you."

You didn't know what either would do.

"I let the Dawnshard consume us, Auxiliary. I let it *feed* on you."

I salvaged a little. This bit of my mind. The last fragment of my soul.

Wit's fault as much as it was Nomad's. Done ostensibly to protect the cosmere. Wit had asked him to carry something known as a Dawnshard, a well of unimaginable Investiture designed as a weapon.

Nomad didn't know the specifics. Only that the result of trying to help was a dead friend—reduced to a voice in his head—and entire armies trying to hunt him. He'd accepted that terrible weapon to hide it, and that power had warped his soul. Worse, he hadn't known, hadn't realized, that bonding Auxiliary would lead to such a tragedy.

They'd spent years together with the potential lurking there, unseen. Then, in a moment of need, he'd unconsciously reached out for any energy source he could access. The Dawnshard had found Auxiliary, a being of Investiture.

It had turned Aux's *very substance* into power to fuel Nomad's abilities.

The Dawnshard—the weapon—protected itself. No matter what. No matter who it killed. Nomad had barely been able to stop himself before burning the entirety of Auxiliary's soul away in a moment of supercharged power.

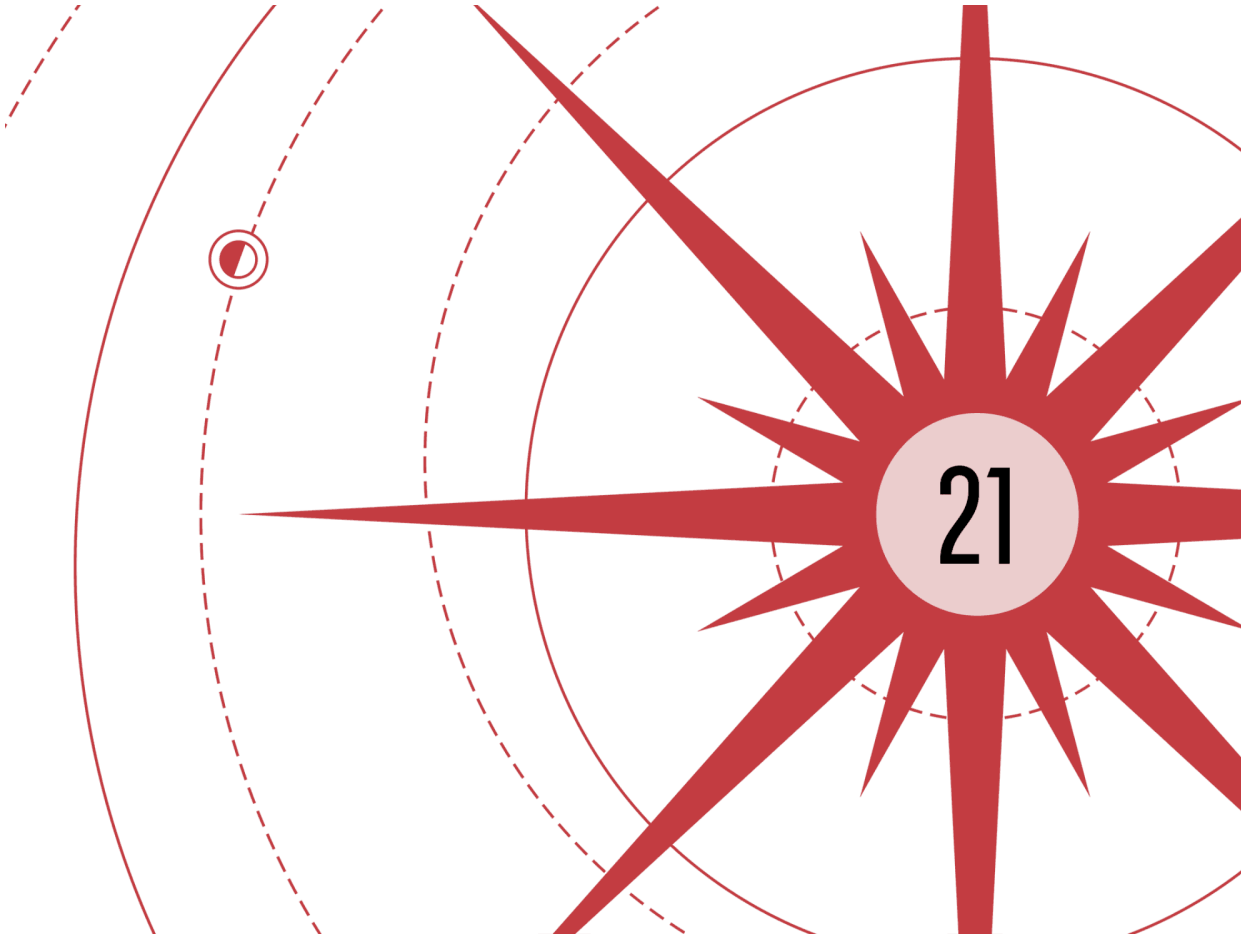
This is not the time for regret, the knight chides softly. You have some very large problems to solve.

He was right. Nomad opened his eyes and fished in his pocket, bringing out the drained sunheart that had been left after he'd ingested the Investiture. It felt like glass in his fingers—a small cylindrical lump of smokestone eight inches tall and a few in diameter. The surface was marked with ridges and a kind of grain, like melted wax. It was random, of course, but he could *swear* that one section looked like a screaming face…

Rebeke said this thing had been able to power a ship for *months*. That kind of power wasn't part of most souls, not even Threnodite souls. Something else was happening. Power was being drawn from another place, with the soul acting as a kind of seed or starter. But why had the Rosharan sunheart the Cinder King showed him been so small? Why hadn't it acted as a similar seed?

He stared at the notebooks and felt a building dread. This was the sort of thing he'd run from, even before the chase truly began. Failures that wrapped his heart like barbed wire, stretching back to his childhood. But it was either this or go crawling to the Cinder King and take his offer of employment. Nomad intended to consider that only if the Night Brigade itself were at the door. So he accepted his lot.

And started drawing up schematics.



TWO HOURS LATER, he had fully drawn schematics, though he had no idea if they would work. The plan wasn't to fabricate all-new engines, but to modify the ones they had to intake water, superheat it to steam, and use it for propellant instead.

It was a slapdash fix. Hopefully it would work. There were some changes he knew he'd need to make, but his brain was growing numb. He needed a break, at least from that problem.

He ignored the cot for now, though he was as tired as ever. Best he could tell, the people of Beacon didn't sleep on regular schedules—indeed, it seemed like the entire *planet* lived on a strange "take hour-long naps when you feel like it" system. Rebeke had been baffled by his explanation that where he came from, people all generally slept at the same time—and for some eight hours at that.

Anyway, he didn't want to sleep yet. He washed up at a basin they'd given him and checked himself in the little hand mirror. He had a faint patina of

stubble on his chin, and his hair had fully regrown—his body, as always, eventually adapted to match how he'd looked when he first took the Dawnshard all those years ago. He tossed the mirror aside, straightening the buttoned shirt they'd given him, and pulled his chair over to Elegy, who was still chained to the wall.

It's not just me, right? the knight asks. It is bizarre that you have a woman chained to your wall, isn't it?

"It is admittedly bizarre."

And you want her…why?

"I think her condition and mine might be similar," he said, narrowing his eyes at Elegy. "When I adopted the Dawnshard from Wit, it created my Torment. Too much Investiture, taken in too quickly, warping my very being."

Why didn't it warp Wit?

"I think it did. He just hides it well. Either way, when I gave away the Dawnshard, it left me changed. With a kind of scar tissue on my soul. That's the Torment. The strange Connection I have to all places at once, the ability to feed on Investiture, the ability to Skip from location to location—but also the curse of not being able to fight back.

"A Dawnshard is one of the primal forces of creation, and the one we carried is diametrically opposed to the concept of violence and harm. The scar tissue on my soul has that same Intent, that same requirement of its host: that I be unable to harm anyone at all for any reason."

It's ironic, you know, the hero says. Because of the way the Dawnshards were used…

"To kill God. Yes, I know." He sat back, thoughtful, meeting Elegy's glare. "She's got something similar, I'm guessing. A canker on her soul. The Cinder King's fire burned away her memories and personality, but there's no reason that should make her so violent, so enraged. I can't figure out how he controls creatures like her. It has to do with some kind of Connection or… well, scar tissue."

On the soul. That makes her violent, where yours makes you the opposite.

"Basically yes," he said.

When you were following your oaths, your natural need to follow them pushed through the scar tissue, though.

"It did, for a time," he said. "But now I feel like the scar is getting worse, Aux. I need to do something to stop that growth or, better, make it recede.

Enough that I can fight, but not so far that I'm unable to Skip away from this planet."

Ideally he'd eventually clear it *all* away, severing his lingering Connection to the Dawnshard. So long as he retained that Connection, he was a link to whoever held it now. And so long as he could locate one of the most powerful weapons in all the cosmere, people would hunt him.

That was too big a problem to deal with at the moment. For now, he'd settle for any kind of therapy that suppressed his symptoms. He'd love to be able to fight back the next time a Charred tried to kill him.

He brought out the drained sunheart again, turned it over in his fingers. "These people," he said, "can transfer Investiture to one another through touch. And their highly Invested souls become these power sources when bombarded long enough by the sun. I'm hoping that I can find a way to siphon a little of my soul into this drained sunheart, taking some of the scar tissue with it. Follow?"

Vaguely, yes. It will be like lancing a boil.

"Yes, but not so gross."

Everything about mortals is gross. But siphoning off your soul…won't that, I don't know, hurt?

"Not if it's a very small amount," he said. "Plus, it will regrow, as will the scar. Human souls are resilient things, Aux. Like our bodies, they self-repair."

It was different for beings like Auxiliary. His essence had been burned away during the tragedy, leaving only this last, limited remnant.

So…you're going to use that rock to try to siphon off whatever soul sickness is making Elegy act so angry. If it works, you're going to try it on yourself, hoping you can cure your own soul sickness. Is that about the short of it?

"Indeed."

Rebeke probably wouldn't appreciate you experimenting on her sister like that.

"Probably not."

That might be why she is hiding outside your door, eh? Listening in?

He paused. "She is?"

Ah! Didn't you notice? I mean, someone is making small noises out there. I'll admit, I'm only guessing it is her. Powerful though I am, clairvoyance isn't on my list of abilities. But it does seem like it would be her, considering how the person keeps pressing against the door—as if trying to hear.

Yeah, Auxiliary was probably right.

I really thought you'd noticed, the knight says loftily, otherwise I'd have said something.

"Don't lie," he said with a smile. "You like showing off."

I love showing off, the knight exclaims. It feels so good. Why do mortals have taboos against it?

"We have taboos against everything that is fun," he said, still toying with the drained sunheart. If he was right, then everyone on this world had this same strange Connection to one another, allowing the ability to transfer parts of themselves. And this empty power source had held a distilled version of someone's soul, so it should work too, right?

However, when he tried touching the object to Elegy, nothing happened. Even when he braced himself, reached in, and touched it to her ember. She railed at him, and he heard a thump at the door as Rebeke shifted.

He pulled back, making a note in his book. He hadn't actually expected it to be that easy.

Investiture responded to human thought. It wasn't technically energy or matter—but it could *become* either. Investiture, energy, and matter were all one, as per Khriss's Second Law. It couldn't be created or destroyed; it could only change from one state to another.

However, Investiture responded differently from energy or matter. You could Command it. More precisely, the mindset you reached by speaking those Commands enabled you to enforce your will upon it. That was common across many of the flavors and varieties of power around the cosmere. Commands, oaths, incantations…any way to focus your will, your Intent, and project it to the Investiture.

Like the Command he'd tried with Contemplation earlier, which came from the planet Nalthis to make Investiture flow between bodies.

Today he tried almost all the ones he knew, in a variety of styles, as he pressed the sunheart against Elegy's exposed arm and ordered it to drain her heat. Nothing happened, and each failure was frustrating, suggesting that he didn't really know what he was doing.

He slumped down in his seat, tapping his head against the backrest. There *was* power locked away inside of Elegy, power that made her stronger, faster, more resilient. How to get at it? After some thought, he decided he probably didn't know the right Commands. There were methods using tones and vibrations that might work, but he didn't have that equipment—and he

knew that heat, at least, transferred naturally between people here. That gave him his best clue to the mechanism of moving Investiture on this planet.

If this theory was even viable—which he couldn't say for certain—success would depend on using the local ways that people here invoked or evoked their power. So he'd need something familiar to this people, their particular way of organizing thoughts and will. But what would the local variety of that be? Not oaths, but…

The moment it occurred to him, it seemed obvious. "Rebeke!" he shouted in their tongue. "Would you come in here a moment? I need to ask you something."

The soft sounds at the door stopped. Then a sheepish Rebeke opened the door and stepped in.

Pretend, the knight says, I have a very smug expression on right now.

Rebeke glanced at her sister, looking relieved to find her unharmed. She then turned to Nomad, clearly expecting a scolding, which he didn't offer. He'd probably have listened in too, in her situation.

Nomad pointed to Elegy. "Didn't you mention that your people have some kind of ritual prayer they say before sharing heat with another person or, more importantly, before *taking* it?"

"There…are several," she said. "Why?"

"Tell me the situations."

"Well, there's one said between a husband and wife," she said, "before… intimacy."

Wow. Ritual prayers before sex. Sounds…fun?

"Anything else?"

"Prayer before first touching a loved one," she said. "Prayer of thanks before offering heat to one who has protected or served you. Prayer when with the dying, to take their heat before it fades away—"

He sat straighter in his chair.

"We only do it if someone is dying for certain!" she exclaimed. "And only for one who desperately needs the heat, to help them with a sickness or weakness!"

That's cute, the knight says. She thinks you care about their social customs. How endearing.

"Tell it to me," he said.

"Um… Blessed Adonalsium, accept this soul and reward them for their heat given. Bold one on the threshold of death, give me your dying heat that I may bless those who still live."

Perfect. A forced removal of Investiture, ritualized with a formal Command. He snatched the sunheart off the table and pressed it to Elegy's arm, drawing another growl. He said the words exactly as Rebeke had.

Nothing happened.

"You're trying to transfer her heat to the sunheart?" Rebeke said. "It won't work like you think. We've tried, and while we can store some heat in a depleted sunheart, it doesn't give enough power to fly ships."

Confirmation, the knight muses, that their souls aren't powerful enough to make sunhearts on their own. It's not just a congealed soul—the bombardment of sunlight is required to supercharge the thing, creating the power source.

"How do you do it?" Nomad asked her. "Transfer heat into a sunheart?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "It's not often used."

He thought a moment, then tried again, changing the words. "Bold one on the threshold of death, give this *sunheart* your heat, that it may bless those who still live." The tweak might be enough to…

No. Again, nothing happened.

"Why are you trying this?" Rebeke said. "I don't understand. There's really no use in transferring heat to a sunheart—it's not alive, so it can't appreciate the gift."

"Cosmereologically," he said, "you'd be surprised at the wide range of definitions of 'alive' and 'dead.' Regardless, I need to know how to transfer a bit of someone's soul into a sunheart."

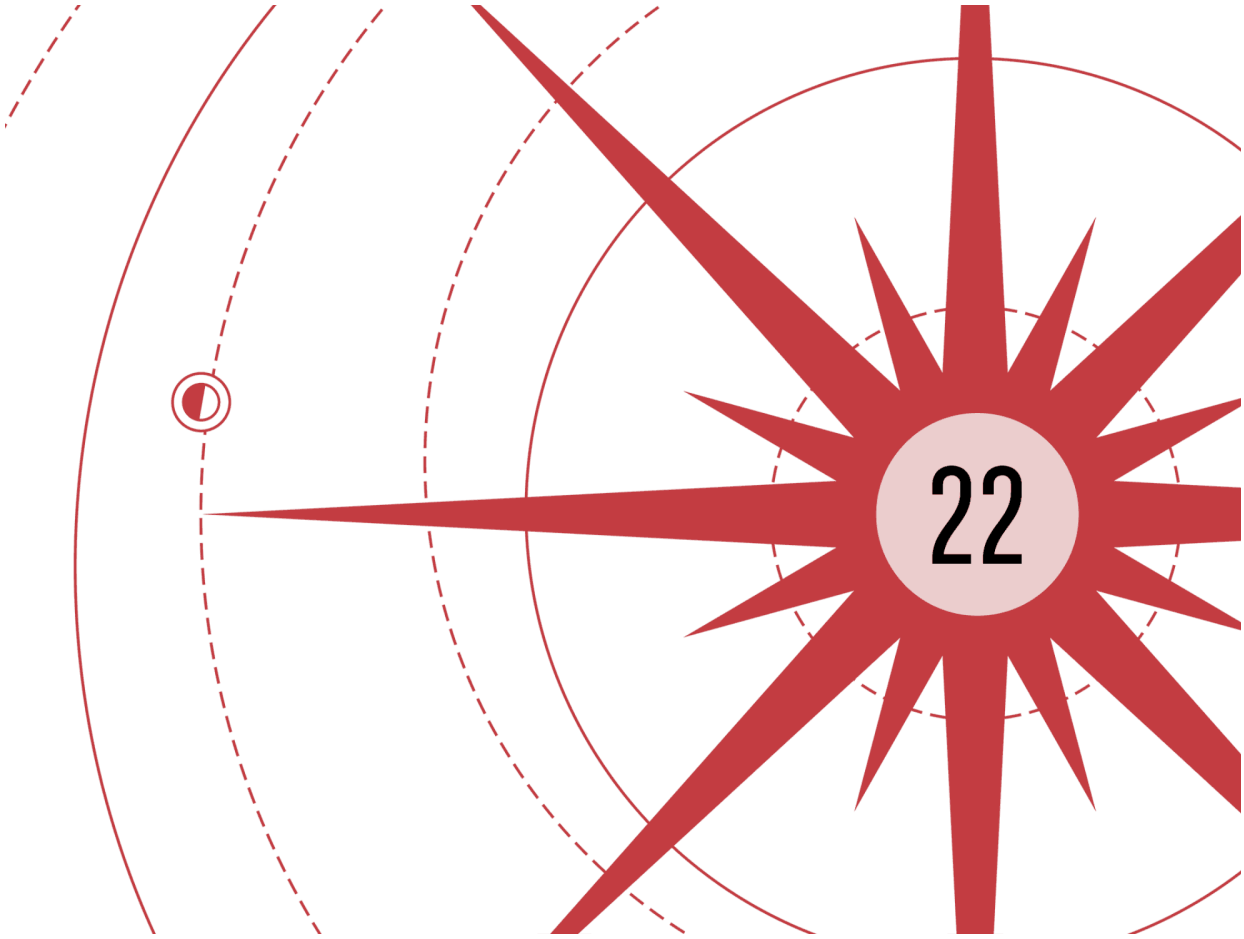
"Why?" Rebeke demanded. "What are you trying to do?"

"Explore the nature of your power sources," he said. But unfortunately he was at a dead end here. And they were several hours closer to death on the slopes of an approaching mountain. He took the notebooks with his schematics from the table and held them up. "I need to build a prototype of my engine design. Quickly. You told me your people could fabricate parts."

"We can't fabricate for you," she said. "But our ancestors can."

He paused. "So…wait. You can't do it anymore?"

"No, we never could," she said. "But our *ancestors* can." She looked to him. "I suppose it's time to introduce you to the ghosts."



THEY WERE KEPT on Beacon's largest ship, a cylindrical vessel that served as a central hub. Nomad had learned that Beacon didn't always assemble in the exact same way; ships would hook together and spread out organically. Metal sheets placed over holes made it look more cohesive than it was.

Some general rules were followed, however. Larger ships in the middle. Smaller, faster ships on the outside. And this hub structure at the very center. He'd taken it for a large meeting room, but as they stepped inside, he realized it held something far different: an enclosure for the dead.

They had configured it like an aquarium. An enormous glass drum, twenty feet tall and twice that wide, dominated the room, leaving only a narrow circle around it for observation. They'd filled the central column with smoke. A shifting white mist, like—

Like leaking souls, he thought, walking up to the glass, hands in the pockets of his long brown leather coat. He was accompanied by Rebeke and

Zeal—who had gotten permission from the Greater Good to bring him to this hallowed ground. A rack on one wall, opposite the large aquarium, held depleted sunhearts.

"Have you ever," he asked, glancing at the tens of lifeless sunhearts, "left those out again in the sunlight?"

"Of course we have," Rebeke said. "They don't recharge. We can't even find them afterward most of the time, but the few we've recovered were as dull as when we left them."

Damnation. That made sense, though. They'd of course tried that—probably one of the first things they had tried. He looked back at the aquarium—they called the enclosure itself the Reliquary. He found that name oddly inappropriate. These weren't relics. Those were usually the bodies or body parts of holy ones whose souls had departed. This was presumably the opposite.

He didn't see them at first. He only saw that shifting mist. It was light and effulgent, but thick. If the dead existed inside that chamber, he couldn't—

A face formed from the mists and pressed up against the glass, eyes glowing red, hands—made of smoke—slamming against the barrier. It had a gaunt face with a drooping jaw and sunken cheeks.

Nomad jumped despite himself. Even though he'd been expecting it, seeing a shade was unnerving. When he'd been on Threnody, these things had been incredibly dangerous. Society contorted around their existence, living by strict rules to avoid angering them. When the eyes went red, these things were deadly, seeking to kill. Yet here, the people of Beacon kept them like…pets?

"We fled the Evil," the ghost said in a whispering voice, like rustling papers. Another appeared over its shoulder, just a vague, smoky outline of a person with red eyes. "Then we fled Threnody. We are your Chorus. We remember. We came here, to the land of the twilight rings, to make our own world. Do not forget. Adonalsium will claim us eventually. Live. And remember."

Well, the knight says, at least we know how they keep their lore straight through the generations.

"On your homeworld," Nomad said, "these things kill people."

"They'd kill us," Zeal said, "if we went into the Reliquary."

"Are they self-aware?" Nomad asked.

"I sustain an uncertainty in that regard," he replied. "They'll answer questions sometimes. Other times they give no answers, only recitations."

"They mostly only talk about the past, though," Rebeke said. She'd stepped up beside him and watched intently through the glass. "About lore, history. Almost nothing about themselves. Each member might as well be interchangeable. We don't know if they remember their individual lives. They're like…living history books."

"'Living' being a loose term," Zeal added.

Nomad nodded, thoughtful. "That's far more than what I'd expect from them, knowing the shades of Threnody."

"We were the first who died on Canticle," a shade whispered to him. "The first to live in this land and devise the designs of flight—based on the ships that brought us here. But then we died and rose as shades. Remembering."

"Shades do not remember," another said. "We are not shades. We are the Chorus of the people."

"But others," another said, pressing against the glass, "must be given to the sun. This is the sun's land."

"Do this not," the first said, "and shades will overrun the world. Such a small planet. They will take everything. They would rip and destroy you."

"As we would," another added, "if allowed. To taste the flesh of the living. To drink their heat."

"So sweet," another said.

"So sweet," the first agreed.

"They…do that too," Zeal added. "Talk about killing us. It's rather unnerving."

Such invigorating places you take me, Nomad.

"There!" Rebeke said, pointing. "There, it's *him*."

"You don't know that, Rebeke," Zeal said softly.

"What?" Nomad asked, noting the way she stood so close to the glass, peering into the mist. "Him?" It took him only a moment to realize. "Your brother?"

"I saw his face among them," Rebeke said.

“We think that maybe,” Zeal said, “people who die without being given to the sun are drawn to join the Chorus. They say that shades will rise from those who die and don’t become sunhearts, but we rarely experience that—instead, sometimes after a death, we see mist gather and move to the Reliquary.”

“It was him,” Rebeke said. She seemed to be trying to convince herself. “Though he spoke like the others, as if he’d been there from the beginning…”

Nomad didn’t have much reason to care either way. “What does this have to do with my engine designs?”

“Show them the schematics,” Zeal said.

“The ghosts,” he said flatly, “are engineers.”

“No,” Zeal said. “They’re… Well, you’ll see.”

Nomad sighed and pressed his designs against the glass. The red eyes gathered around, faces crowding to see, mouths moving as they whispered—but they didn’t say anything intelligible. They inspected all seven pages, one at a time, as he held them up. Then they faded back into the mists.

Zeal waved to the side, where a man stood on watch. A worker? A guard? A clergyman? Some combination of the three? He engaged some machinery and lowered a piece of unrefined metal from storage. The chunk was wide and flat, with dirt still stuck to the bottom. It looked like it had pooled on the surface of the ground when it was liquid, then hardened there.

More such followed. Some copper, he thought, and a variety of other metals—while that first and largest piece had been mostly iron. It all entered the mists from the top, and Nomad realized with discomfort that there was no lid on this enclosure. Inside, the mist churned and grew brighter.

“What are they doing?” he asked Rebeke quietly.

“Building your machinery.”

“How, though?”

“We don’t know. You put in resources. You show them detailed instructions, and you get out the thing you want.”

“When a new settlement is founded,” Zeal said, “we always take some of the smoke. We’re not sure how far we can divide it—but it’s worked so far. You can transport it in special containment devices. We took some of it from Union, along with an older containment unit acquired by absorbing a smaller community.”

“How long will the fabrication take?” Nomad asked. If they were building something, why was the enclosure so silent?

"Depends," Zeal said. "For something like this, under an hour. They're faster when it's something they've done before, though."

Under an hour to fabricate complicated machinery? He wasn't going to complain—though even if it was true, their deadline was going to be very tight.

I think they're building it like I build things from myself, Auxiliary said. *You've seen this before. You use it every day, Nomad.*

"You don't absorb raw materials and spit out permanent devices," he said.

Yes, but isn't that actually more reasonable than what we do?

Well…maybe it was. He'd grown so accustomed to Auxiliary that he sometimes didn't consciously appreciate how extraordinary the spren was, using up only a minimal amount of Investiture from Nomad for each manifestation. That said, this *did* explain why so few on this planet had acted shocked by what Auxiliary could do. He supposed if your entire society was based on arcane mists materializing objects at your whims, Aux fit right in.

"Would you like something to eat while you wait, Sunlit?" Zeal asked.

"Sure. The spicier the better."

"Spicy?" Zeal asked, as if the word were unfamiliar.

"Just bring me anything," Nomad said with a sigh.

Zeal nodded, leaving Nomad and Rebeke standing beside the glass, watching the shifting mists inside. Someone out there in the cosmere would probably be *fascinated* by this. Threnodite shades who were somewhat self-aware? And who could rearrange the structure of metal as if it were Investiture to be sculpted? Maybe that was why the Scadrians were here, in their secretive research station beneath the ground.

Thinking of that, of course, reminded him of how much he had yet to do. Even if the modified engine worked—which it wouldn't, not on the first try—he had to find a way to get this people enough power to survive the rotation. And even if they did *that*, they needed a way to find the opening to the Scadrian base. How could they manage that? Presumably the only ones who really knew its location were living in it.

No. The Cinder King knows… he thought. *So how do we get the information out of him…*

"You don't like it, do you?" Rebeke said from beside him.

He frowned, not following her.

"Being called Sunlit," she said. "You grimaced when Zeal said the name. And earlier you asked us to call you Nomad."

"No, I don't care for Sunlit," he said. "You're right."

“Why? It’s a title of honor, of great respect.”

“Anyone Invested to the level I am could have survived a few seconds in the sunlight. Even if the term is one of honor—which I can understand—I don’t think it means anything. I like to earn my titles, and I don’t feel I did anything particularly interesting in this case.”

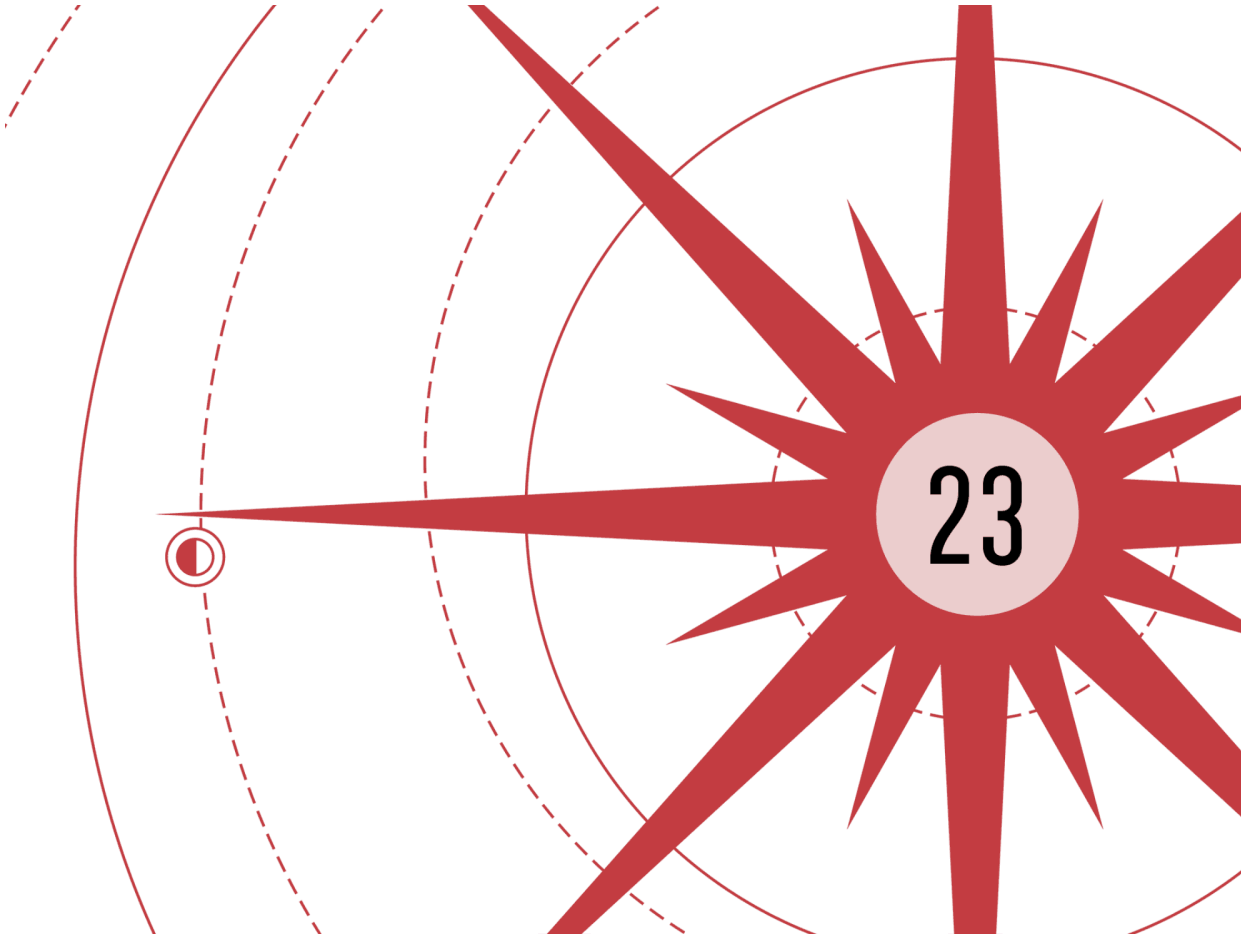
She nodded slowly at that. “But earlier you told Contemplation you didn’t mind if she called you that. Why say such a thing if it bothers you?”

“Because,” he said, “sometimes it’s not about you individually. Sometimes it’s about being a symbol. Sometimes you just adopt the name you’re given because it inspires people. I’ve seen it happen. Didn’t think it would happen to me.”

Zeal returned with some snacks, and they continued waiting. Eventually, after about forty-five minutes, the glow in the enclosure faded. The worker operated the simple crane to bring from the mists a realization of Nomad’s schematics: parts to modify their engines.

“Now what?” Rebeke asked, sounding excited.

“Now,” Nomad replied, “we install this on an engine and watch it explode.”



IT WAS A FINE explosion. Lit up the darkness with a flare of orange and yellow as the housing for the engine gave out. He probably hadn't made it thick enough; he'd worried about that.

They stood at the edge of Beacon as it flew, looking out over the darkness. With some help, he'd installed the parts on a small hovercycle engine, then used another hovercycle to take it out and test it. They'd activated the prototype engine a short distance away via remote. It had soared up, and then…

The flash of its failure washed over the group and made several of them jump, even though Nomad had warned them to expect it.

"So that's it," Compassion said. The frail woman had been provided a seat from which to watch the experiment. "Our deaths are sealed."

"Hardly," Nomad said. "I *told* you it would explode."

"If we strap those to our ships, we'll be strapping ourselves to bombs!"

“We’re not going to use *those* engines,” Nomad said. “You *expect* the first one to fail. We iterate now. Build another prototype, a better one, and see what happens to it. And so forth.”

“And so forth?” Contemplation said, arms folded. Lit only by the running lights of the ships forming the city, her pale skin took on a spectral quality. “How long do you expect ‘and so forth’ to take, Sunlit?”

It was, he had to admit, a valid question. He’d already expended more than three of their hours on this work, leaving less than seven until they reached the highlands. How quickly could he revise and improve this design? How quickly could he experiment enough to find an engine that worked? A master engineer could have done it, undoubtedly.

Here, though, he was lacking. That wasn’t false humility; he’d always been interested in these kinds of things, but he’d chosen the path of a soldier instead. Well, he’d been thrust upon that path, and then he’d chosen to walk it.

Most of what he knew about engineering came from the first few years of his exile, when he’d fallen in with some scholars and really had a chance to learn. Fortunately he had a hope for help. Nearby, the slender woman who was head of repairs and engineering in Beacon had gathered her team, and they were looking over his schematics. He strode over to them, right near the edge of Beacon, with a drop into darkness beyond. He squatted down, and the lead engineer looked at him. Tan skinned with long black hair, she could almost have been Alethi—if not for her strikingly Threnodite name that he’d learned during the fabrication: Solemnity Divine.

“This is genius,” she whispered, hand on the schematics.

“Thanks,” he said. “But I think the boiler housing was too thin.”

Solemnity Divine nodded. “Dirge thinks so too, but I think it’s your seals here and here. But with tweaks, I think it *will* work.”

“The propellant will run out quickly,” another of the engineers warned. “We have three large water tanks for watering crops, but that’s not much to lift the entire city.”

“And if we pare down our ships?” Nomad asked. “Shrink Beacon to only the essential vessels?”

The engineers shared a look.

“Maybe possible,” Solemnity Divine said. “Even with that, I doubt we’d have much flight time. Maybe…two hours? Depending on how low we can get the city’s weight?”

“Long enough?” Nomad asked. “We just have to crest the peaks and start down the other side.”

“Should be,” she said. “Should be. It will be close, anyway…”

“You think you all can improve on this?” he asked, gesturing. “Get it right? There’s not a lot of time.”

“We can try,” she said. She sounded uncertain, but she was already making notes on his schematic.

That’s convenient, the hero notes as he watches them fix Nomad’s terrible first attempt.

“Not convenient,” he said. “Expected. It takes a lot of skill and knowledge to keep a city like this flying; this lot are far more competent than they give themselves credit for. They simply needed a nudge. My design takes them ninety percent of the way there. I had the inspiration; now their expertise can fill in the gaps in my practical knowledge.”

Unlike most of the others, the engineers seemed very interested in the way he occasionally spoke in a foreign tongue. To distract them from that, he leaned in close. “You have work crews, I assume? People who maintain the city?”

“I’ve got a good fifteen people for the task,” Solemnity Divine said. “Why?”

“Because while your top people are working on the engines, I need the others doing something else: making a number of your larger living spaces airtight.”

The five engineers in the huddle frowned, and he realized—for all their experience with flying—they had little understanding of what was going to happen atop those mountains.

“We’re going to a place where the atmosphere gets very thin,” he explained. “Practically nonexistent. No air. No breathing. Fortunately we won’t be there long. Your ships have thick metal hulls, and can probably maintain pressure if we seal them right.”

“We can do that,” she said. “But won’t we suffocate?”

“It’s only for a few hours,” Nomad said. “And we only have to support a hundred and thirty-five people. We’ll pick ten of the largest ships by air volume, divide the people up, and put them inside. We lock those ten ships together, and I’ll fly them. I don’t need to breathe.”

Solemnity Divine blinked. “You…what?”

“I don’t need to breathe,” he said. “Quirk of my heritage. I mean, I *like* breathing. Feels normal, lets me talk. Better to use natural processes to

oxygenate the blood when possible. But I don't strictly need it. And I can take a vacuum without much trouble. Been doing *that* for decades."

Sure enough, several of them muttered about the powers of the Sunlit Man. He doubted their lore actually ascribed such specific powers to the hero—these kinds of legends tended to be vague. Too many places had them. And too many, to his chagrin, had been created—either by intent or accident—by his master. Wit had a habit of…starting conversations.

Regardless, Nomad allowed the engineers their assumptions. Explaining the nature of a highly Invested body, and the ways the Spiritual template and Cognitive perception could maintain a body's status in the face of extreme conditions, seemed like a waste of breath right now.

"I'll get people working on it," Solemnity Divine said. "I don't think this will be a problem, like I said. We'll prepare these new engines as well as ten ships with airtight compartments, then lock the modified ships around the hub bearing the Chorus, and you'll guide it from the main deck. All this, we will do, except… I respectfully venture to request that *you* tell the Greater Good about the necessity of abandoning most of our ships."

He gave her a grim, tight-lipped nod in return. Most of Beacon would have to be left behind. He'd see to it that the city leaders understood.

"Awful trade," he muttered, but nodded to her. He left them with his schematics and trotted back to the others, where the Greater Good were talking with Zeal and several assistants. Rebeke hovered at the perimeter of the conversation, seeming uncertain if she were welcome or not.

They all turned to Nomad as he approached, seeming to brace themselves. They knew too, didn't they?

"We'll have to leave most of Beacon behind," he said. They obviously needed someone to voice it. "The engineers will pick your ten largest ships, by volume of living space, and prepare those. We'll dump everything else."

"To be devoured by the sun," Compassion said, head bowed. "Our grand city of freedom, Elegy's vision…"

"It will be a small miracle to get even part of this city to safety," he said. "You know that. And if we find the Refuge, you'd be abandoning Beacon anyway."

"That doesn't mean," Confidence said, "that doing it won't hurt."

"How are we going to find the opening to the Refuge?" Contemplation asked. "If we bring only the largest of the ships, then we'll be leaving the prospectors behind—meaning no scanning devices."

"Let's bring one prospector, then," Nomad said. "Just in case."

“We can leave the farming equipment behind,” Contemplation said. “The gatherers that harvest metal from the melted fields…”

“We’ll have meeting halls,” Compassion said, “dining rooms, cargo holds, and places of worship. That’s it. If we don’t find the opening, we’re doomed.”

“We were doomed anyway,” Confidence said. “We chose this because it offered a slim chance.” She fixed her eyes on Nomad. “You can find that doorway? Have you figured out how?”

“I will,” he promised. “You’ll have to rely on me to figure something out.”

“We’re relying on you for a lot,” Confidence said, arms folded.

“I wouldn’t want to depend on me so much either,” he agreed. “But your options are all pretty terrible right now. So this is where we are.” He shrugged.

Aren’t you supposed to be good with people? the knight asks. You seem to forget that fairly often.

Well, he was right, so what did it matter? Besides, his gut told him that this frankness was what these people needed. Auxiliary might not have been able to see it, but this *was* being “good” with people. In this situation. It was a stark time for a stern people living on a harsh world. They didn’t want sugar coatings.

They nodded and sent someone to confirm to the engineers that they’d agreed with his plan. He turned to go, but Confidence spoke, stepping toward him.

“Sunlit,” she said. “I want you to know that you are appreciated.”

He paused. He hadn’t expected that. This tall woman with severe features was the one who had been most resistant to his ideas.

“We know,” she said, the other two nodding, “that you were likely offered a deal by the Cinder King. It is his way. He enjoys having power over people and will do whatever is required—even pay them, though he hates it—to achieve that end. You could have thrown in with him. You did not.”

“He broke his oath,” Nomad said.

“Regardless, you have our thanks. Do not mistake my skepticism for hostility. We appreciate you. And if we do manage to crest those mountains and find the Refuge, I will be the first to offer you my warmth in thanks.”

He nodded, and a bit of actual gratitude—real, genuine emotion—cut through his grungy patina of cynicism and exhaustion. It was nice to be appreciated.

“I don’t need that warmth you offer,” he said. “But maybe you could tell me something. Rebeke says there’s a way to give heat to a sunheart, like it was a person?”

“Yes,” Contemplation said. “But this is useless. It barely charges the sunheart at all—a person could give their entire soul to it, and it would only keep a ship in the air for a short time.”

Because they only have one BEU of Investiture, Auxiliary mused. *Yes, interesting.*

“I need to know how anyway,” Nomad said. “For my experiments. I tried it earlier with a sunheart, and nothing happened.”

“Was it a drained sunheart?” Contemplation asked.

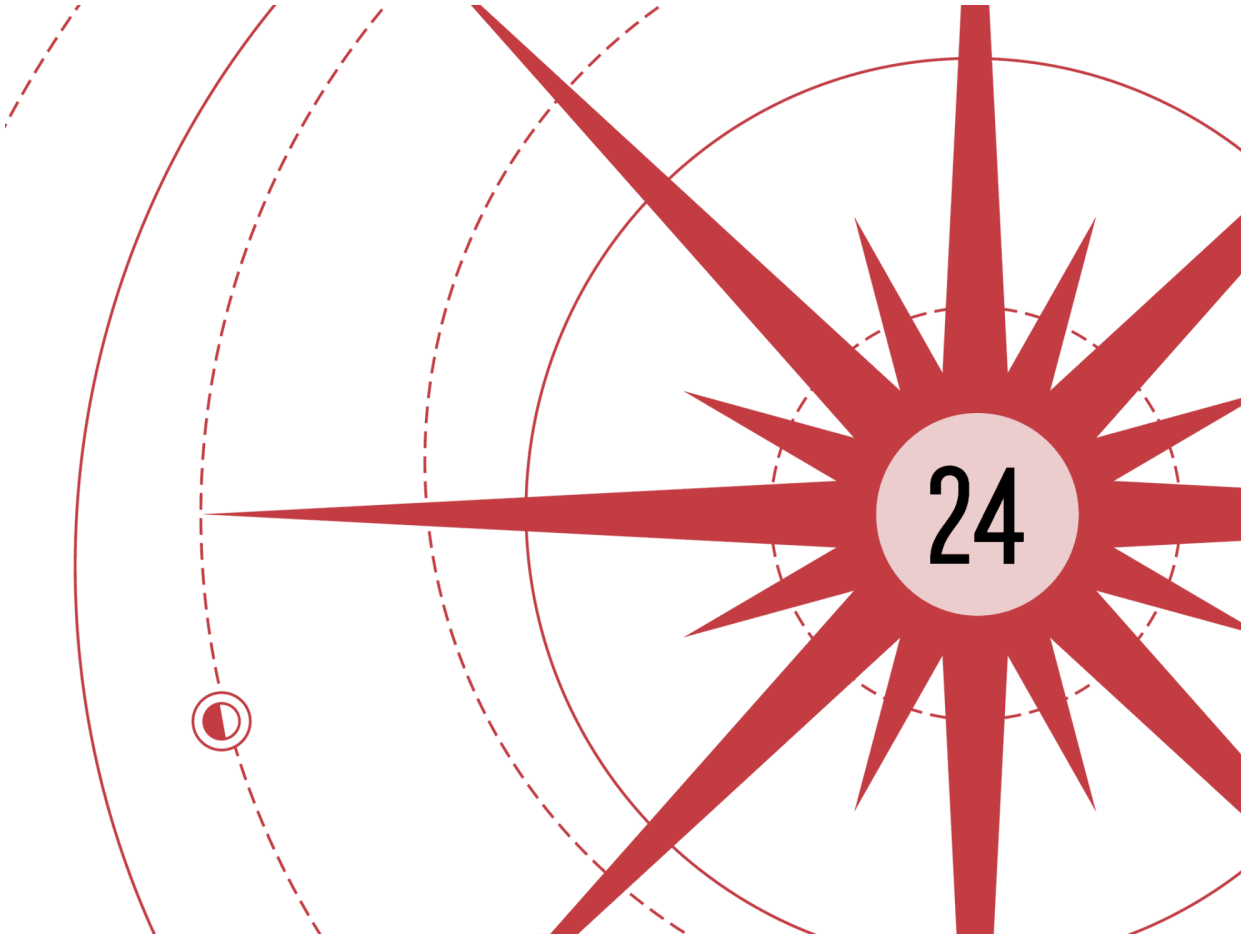
“Well, yes.”

“That won’t work,” she said. “You can’t give your soul to a corpse. You need someone living. Or a—”

“A charged sunheart,” he said, smacking his forehead. “Damnation. Obviously.” There *were* ways to put Investiture into inanimate objects, but it tended to be much harder. And much more dangerous.

Sunhearts were considered *alive* by the reckoning of Investiture. At least, charged ones were. Storms. He was an idiot.

He needed to try again with Elegy.



HE LEFT THEM to divide the people among the chosen buildings while he went to test his realization. They'd harvest the sunhearts of the other ships, then leave the surplus hulks behind. As he'd suggested, they did keep one scout ship with a prospecting device—they picked one where he'd been living, the one that had belonged to Elegy—and the hovercycles.

He rushed away, Rebeke close behind. Before going to his quarters, he asked Rebeke for permission, then stopped beside her hovercycle and pulled out its sunheart.

Hmmm… Aux said. *I'd guess around two hundred BEUs in this one. Far less than what powers a full ship. Still, on a lot of planets, that would be a wealth of Investiture. Enough to reach the Second Heightening, and here it's used for simple locomotion.*

"At a steep cost," Nomad said, heading toward his quarters, Rebeke still trailing behind.

Even on highly Invested worlds, a person's soul isn't more than three BEUs, Aux replied. *You are right about this Investiture coming from somewhere. Keeping this city flying, though it's much smaller than Union, must require sunhearts worth tens of thousands.*

He'd considered that. He considered it again, then continued on his original path. Back at his room, Elegy was still chained to the wall—and yes, that was still uncomfortably strange. Stormfather help him if his master ever found out about this situation. Wit's delight at the potential jokes—most relating to Nomad's methods of getting a woman to stay near him—would be able to power small cities.

Nomad held up the sunheart, which glowed with a simmering deep red light. Yes, it made sense. For the Commands he'd been using, you needed people, or things, with life in them. In essence, he had been trying to command a dead hound to do tricks. This time, he held up the living sunheart to Elegy.

It glowed with the power of the soul that formed it. And when he spoke the words of the prayer Rebeke had taught him, their mother's soul knew what to do. It drew forth some of the life from Elegy in the form of radiant smoke that glowed a luminescent red.

Perfect. Now they were getting somewhere. He grinned, pulling back and digging out another notebook.

"I still don't understand the point of this," Rebeke said as Elegy, as usual, snarled and growled.

"Humor me," Nomad said. "Tell me. There's something different about the sunhearts that make the Charred, right? You all handle these ones without problems—but touch one of those, and they burn away the body and create a monster. Why?"

"We…don't know," Rebeke admitted. "You're right that the Cinder King has access to strange sunhearts with terrible powers—we call them cinderhearts. They glow with a harsher light and consume anyone who touches them. We don't know where he got them, but they are how he rules. First, with the one in his own chest, giving him the ability to feed on thousands of souls. Second, with the ones he uses to make his Charred, who serve him."

There's some Connection going on there, I suspect, Auxiliary said. *Looking at his cinderheart and those of the Charred, his glows even more brightly. And they seem to react to his mental commands. Have you noticed?*

He hadn't, but he trusted Aux, who picked up on things he didn't.

“I still want to know what you’re doing to my sister,” Rebeke said. “And why you’re doing it.”

“I’m learning,” Nomad said, making some notes. “I’ve done nothing harmful to her, just siphoned off a little of her Investiture. But this isn’t enough. Otherwise, those bracers would be enough. Or, storms, having one of you touch her would be enough. I have to get at the core of the soul and remove the residue cankering it…”

“For what?” Rebeke said. “I barely understand what you’re saying, but I do *not* see how this helps us build engines.”

He ignored her. If he was going to figure out how to use this process to remove the Torment from his soul, he needed a stronger transfer. Maybe he needed to press the sunheart into her skin? When the Cinder King created one of his warriors, he jammed the cinderhearts in deep.

He held up the sunheart next to the cinderheart at Elegy’s core and found hers was a darker shade. “Auxiliary,” he said, stepping as close as he dared to examine it. “That’s not anti-Investiture, is it?”

Doesn’t feel like it, Auxiliary said back. *But I’m not the best at spotting that.*

“It seems corrupted—overlaid with some kind of…membrane or coating. Like the skin of a fruit.” He thought for a moment, then said to Rebeke, “It’s important that we both understand that my next action isn’t intended to hurt her in any way.”

“That sounds ominous,” Rebeke said, stepping toward him. “Why do you say it that way?”

“Because I need to believe it,” he said. He held up the glowing sunheart—then touched it to Elegy’s cinderheart and spoke the proper prayer. “Bold one on the threshold of death, give this sunheart your dying heat that it may bless those who still live.”

Elegy started screaming. Rebeke grabbed his arm, trying to pull him away. She threw her entire weight at him, which wasn’t a ton, considering her size. He remained steady, watching the darkness on Elegy’s cinderheart drain away.

Just like, he hoped, the canker on his own soul would. It was *working*. Finally Rebeke grabbed onto his arm and hung there, her entire five-foot-tall frame dragging down on his muscles. That was enough to make him budge, and he was forced to pull back and push Rebeke off.

“I told you,” he snapped, “I wasn’t intending to hurt her!”

“Intent or not,” Rebeke shouted, “that’s what you did! She’s helpless! I want you to remand her to the care of our authorities. I won’t stand for her to be your pawn.”

He stepped toward Elegy again, but Rebeke threw herself between them, frantic. Until, behind her, a new voice spoke.

“Who are you?” Elegy said, throat obviously raw, her words ragged—like from an engine too long without oil. “Let me go.”

Rebeke froze, then spun, gasping. Elegy sneered at them and shook her chained arms, but the motions lacked the wild ferocity of moments earlier. More remarkably, she could speak. He’d never heard one of these Charred speak before. Her cinderheart continued to glow, but now in a purer, vibrant shade. Like magma at the heart of a crater.

“Let me go!” she said, louder.

“Elegy?” Rebeke said, stepping forward, reaching out with gloved fingers.

“Let. Me. GO!”

“Well,” Nomad said, tossing the glowing sunheart onto the table, “that worked.” He began making notes.

“You were trying to cure her?” Rebeke said, spinning back to him. “Why didn’t you *say* that?”

Cure her? Oh right. Well, that was the side effect. He paused, then said, “I didn’t know if it would work, and didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

Storms, the younger woman began to cry. She took him by the arm, then struggled to get her glove off, to press her skin to his in thanks. “You have earned heat today,” she whispered, “and I misjudged you. You are a wonderful, *wonderful* man. Thank you.”

Cute, the knight says. How long has it been since anyone looked at you with true admiration?

Did it matter? He pushed her back firmly. She let him, then looked to Elegy, who watched them with a deep frown.

“Tell me who you are,” Elegy demanded. “And why I’m in these chains. What happened to the voice?”

“The voice?” Nomad asked, stepping forward.

“The one who gives commands,” she said, “in my head. Everything was so clear just a moment ago. Now…now I’m confused. Restore the voice!”

“The Cinder King,” Nomad mused. “As you suspected, he has a way of controlling them. A direct Connection.”

Her soul is terribly compromised, the hero notes. That usually makes it easier to control or infiltrate a mind, doesn’t it?

“It does indeed.” The corrupted sunhearts gave the Cinder King some control over his Charred—but Nomad had removed that control, letting Elegy’s natural personality reemerge.

“It’s her voice,” Rebeke said, “but she doesn’t seem to recognize me. How do we get her to remember?”

Nomad didn’t have a good response. He’d seen cases like this before. Elegy’s memories had almost certainly been burned away by the process that had infected her soul. This wasn’t a case of a little confusion after hitting her head. Her soul had literally been shredded, her mind enslaved.

In his experience, the way forward wouldn’t be to restore her memories, but to help her make new ones. He narrowed his eyes as she rattled the heavy chains, still supernaturally strong.

“The cinderheart’s Investiture remains,” he said. “That comes from the source, not the sludge we drew off. Storms. She can probably feel it in there, driving her.”

A human body, crammed with that much power, would be *electric* with the need to move, to act. One would feel a virtually irresistible urge to use the power, to satisfy its demand to become kinetic. In his case, it drove him to constant motion, to avoid sleep, to push himself to keep running. In Elegy, it was clearly of a more aggressive nature.

The frenzied way these Charred acted, always attacking and enjoying the fight…that might not be the command of the Cinder King. He probably just pointed them in certain directions, kept them working for him, channeling their violent energies.

Nomad took some further notes. How could he apply this to the sludge on his soul? Maybe fashion a knife from the sunheart, then stab himself? That might work, but he feared a Connection problem. These people could all share power, and souls, because of where they were from.

Still, it was the logical next step. He borrowed a knife from Rebeke, who was trying to get Elegy to talk to her. He was able to use it to shave off a piece of the sunheart, something he’d heard them describe. It was less like glass and more like resin. The new fragment continued to glow with the same living light.

He positioned the knife to cut into his own skin. He’d make a small incision on his left arm, then shove the piece of sunheart in. For many uses of Investiture, touching the blood was necessary. Ingesting the piece might have worked, but he wanted to be certain—besides, this would be easier to undo if something went wrong.

Um, Nomad, the knight says, hesitant. This seems kind of stupid.

"And?"

And so maybe don't do it? Choose something not stupid instead?

"I have to try something, Aux," he said. "The Night Brigade could be upon us at any time—and I need to be able to fight if that happens."

Still. Are you certain you want to be this brash?

"What about me makes you think that I'd do anything else?"

The knight gives a long-suffering sigh, but is forced to admit the truth. Nomad is at the very least consistent in his stupidity.

Nomad made a small incision on his forearm. He made a fist and stuck the sliver of sunheart into the wound. He said the prayer, with proper Intent, that had worked on Elegy—then pressed a cloth against the wound to stanch the blood.

Nothing happened. He said the words again, trying to maintain the proper frame of mind. He also said them a little differently several times, using variations of oaths from his homeworld, then other Investiture-transferring incantations he'd learned.

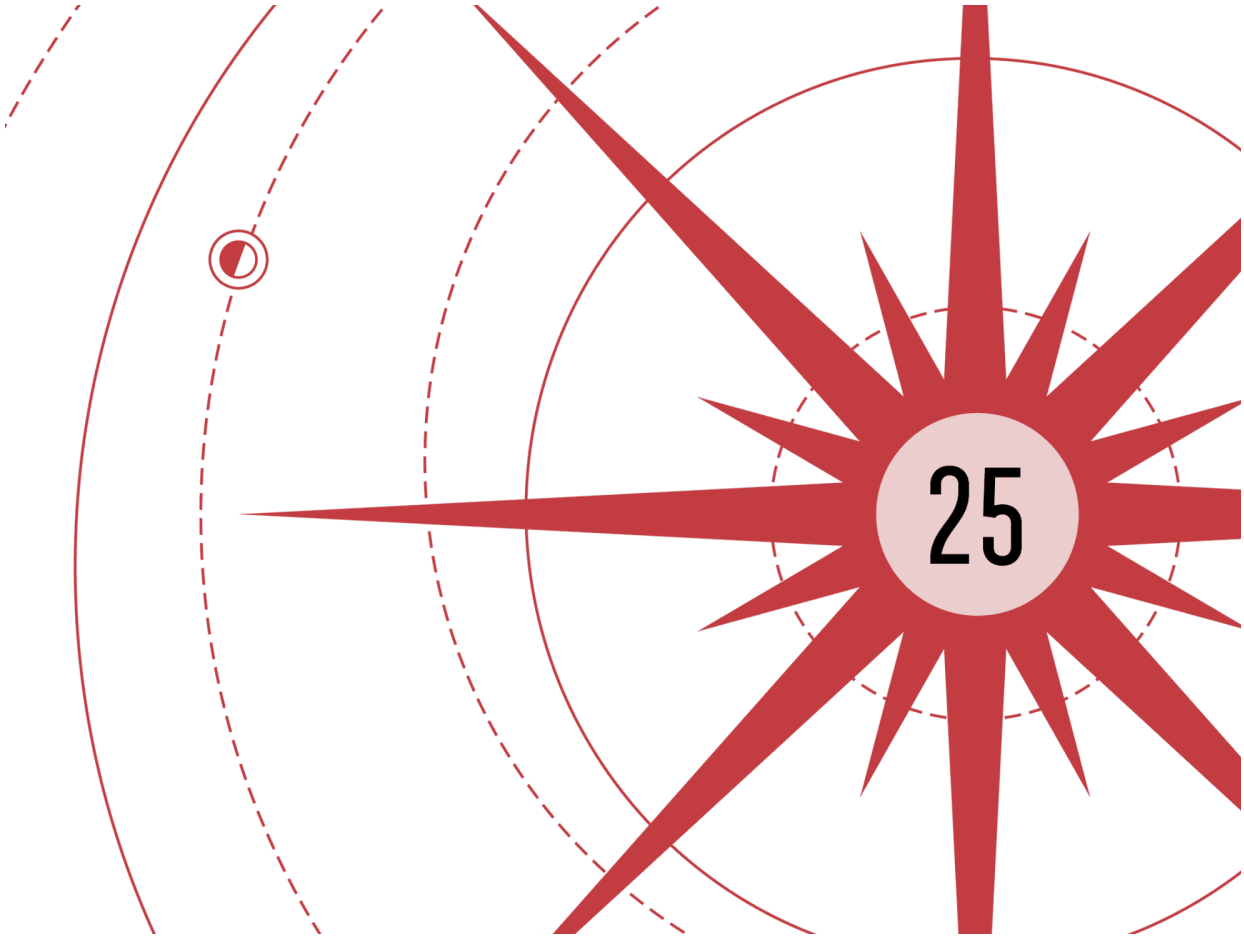
None seemed to do anything. Sharing Investiture was much more difficult when you didn't have Connections to the power or the people who'd created it. Perhaps that was the problem here. Or maybe it *was* working, but he just couldn't feel any—

Click.

He looked up with a sharp intake of breath to see Rebeke undoing the manacles on her sister's feet. The ones on her arms already dangled free.

Damnation.

Elegy met his eyes, then leaped at him with a howl of determined anger.



REBEKE SCREAMED AS the Charred shoved aside the table and went for Nomad's throat. He got his own hands up, grabbing her wrists before her nails dug into his flesh, but her momentum took them both to the floor in a writhing heap.

He grunted, rolling them to the side, trying to get the upper hand. This *should* have been easy. He'd trained extensively in grappling over the years, while she fought with an unskilled frenzy, eyes wide and teeth clenched. But every time he got close to putting her into a secure hold, she shoved free, breaking his grip with a burst of raw strength.

He found himself struggling to keep control. She moved in unexpected ways, kneeing him, biting at him as they rolled. He finally tried to cuff her across the face to stun her, but that direct an attack made his body freeze, and he involuntarily let her go.

Her movements a blur, she grabbed the sides of his head, then slammed his skull against the steel floor, making him see stars. Luckily his dazed state

was quickly remedied by his healing, and he managed to seize her hands again, acting more by touch than sight.

Elegy was so focused on beating him senseless, she didn't notice as he summoned Auxiliary as cuffs and a chain and snapped them into place. When Rebeke—belatedly—tried to stop her sister, the distraction gave him a chance to roll away and lock Elegy back to the wall. As Elegy started toward him again, he had Auxiliary shorten the chain, then he scrambled out of range of her grasp at last.

Then he lay on the ground, groaning, his vision swimming.

Just over eight percent Skip capacity remaining, Auxiliary whispered as his vision and head healed. A part of Nomad hated hearing the notations like that. He hated feeling like a machine with a power source. Life had felt so much more…vibrant when he'd just drawn in power and sensed a general impression of what he had left.

He sat up, his back against the wall. Rebeke knelt next to him, looking horrified. Her sister wasn't completely locked back in place. Instead of being manacled both hand and foot to the wall, she was just locked there by her wrists, with almost two feet of slack.

She wasn't using it, but instead crouched on her toes, like a feral beast, glaring and growling at him.

"I'm sorry," Rebeke whispered. "I thought… She seemed to be recovering, and I thought…I…"

"Yeah," Nomad said. "Well, next time you do something that insane, could you at least give me a heads-up so I can start running?"

You all right? Auxiliary asked. Voice flat as ever, but the way he asked it —without pretense or affectation—implied real concern.

Nomad rubbed his head. "Yeah," he muttered. "I think."

"Elegy," Rebeke said, standing. "Why did you *do* that?"

"You have me chained," the Charred hissed.

"We were *unchaining* you!" Rebeke said.

"I fight," Elegy said simply. "It's what I do."

"I'm your sister!" Rebeke said. "This man helped me save you from our enemies. You are *home*. You don't need to fight any longer."

Elegy didn't respond, so Rebeke spun on Nomad. "She's not fully cured! Do what you did before, only more."

"Won't help," he said. "Any more of that might kill her. I've drawn off the part that was letting the Cinder King control her; what you see now is everything left of your sister."

Nomad moved over to his desk and cut out the sliver of sunheart in his arm, which had healed over, then wiped off the blood with a rag. He was even more frustrated than before, though. He'd locked up during the fighting—proof that the process hadn't worked on him as it had on Elegy.

So what could he do? Was there a path forward?

Rebeke was standing by the wall, softly crying. Best to give her something to do, so he asked her to fetch Zeal, who had the controls to activate the bracers that Elegy still wore. That would freeze her and let them lock her up fully again.

As Rebeke ran off, he took a few deep breaths. Then, wanting to keep moving, he began sketching out a new set of schematics. He found that if he rapidly jumped between his problems, he worked better. A little here, a little there, always trying to make progress on *something*. In this case, he came up with some ideas to deal with the Cinder King's forces after cresting the mountain.

"Is she really my sister?" Elegy asked from behind, interrupting him.

He glanced toward her. She'd settled into a seated position, hands bound by the chains over her head. She seemed…tired. Exhausted. He knew that feeling.

"Yes," he said. "You had a brother too. He died rescuing you."

"From what?"

"That voice in your head?" Nomad said, making a few more notes. "That's the Cinder King. He took you, put that cinderheart in your chest, and burned away your previous life."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Maybe you want to control me."

"You already let that voice do that," he said. "So why care if we control you or not? Why care if we're lying or not?"

She fell silent, letting him work a little longer.

"I don't belong here," Elegy finally said. "I can feel that is true. That other one, she expects something from me. But I'm not that person she sees when she looks at me."

"What person are you?"

"One on fire," Elegy said softly. "Burning with the fight. I…can't explain."

"Your entire body feels alert, tense, on the edge of panic. Something inside of you rages, like a storm, pushing you into motion. To action. Sitting

still is agony. You need to move, to fight, to be running or struggling in some way."

"…Yes."

He looked up from his notes, meeting her eyes. "You're right," he said. "You aren't the person she thinks you are. You probably can't ever be that person again. You're going to have to find a new way, both of you."

"Let me free."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Will you attack me again?"

"Probably," she admitted. "But you feel it too. You described it. We could fight. You and I. Struggle. Move. Be alive."

"Not interested. Thanks."

She's charming, the knight says.

Rebeke soon returned with Zeal in tow. Using his device, they knocked Elegy unconscious and reset her chains. Zeal watched with curiosity as Nomad dismissed Auxiliary.

"How," he asked, "do you control that shade? Shouldn't it try to kill you?"

"Auxiliary," he replied, "is a little different from your shades. He doesn't attack with glowing eyes or a deadly touch. He uses sarcasm instead, and it's far more painful."

Excuse me, the hero interjects with a voice not the least bit sarcastic. I state facts. How you take them is purely up to you.

Zeal nodded to Elegy. "You sure you don't want me to take her back to the prison?"

"He's helping her," Rebeke explained. "Zeal, she *spoke* to us, like I told you."

"Never heard a Charred do that before," Zeal admitted. "Well, all right. I guess I'll leave this here." He set the control device on the desk.

"Appreciate it," Nomad said.

"What's that?" Zeal asked, nodding to his notes. He leaned in closer. "Guns? On the ships?" He whistled softly, picking out the scale.

Nomad nodded. "I've got a little more experience with weapons than I do with boilers."

"Do they need to be that *big*?" Rebeke said.

"We've picked the biggest, bulkiest ships to ascend over the mountains," Nomad explained. "It's what we need to carry all your people. But it means that once we emerge from the darkness and try to open the way to the Refuge, we're going to be easy prey for the Cinder King."

"Unless…" Zeal said.

“Unless we bring some serious firepower,” Nomad said. “And hit him with something he’s never seen before.” He sat back, holding up his notebook. “If your ancestors really can fabricate anything, given raw materials and schematics, then I see no reason not to go big. These should work with sunhearts as power.” He closed the notebook. “But they’re irrelevant for now. Unless we get over those mountains, nothing else is going to matter.”

“What are our chances of doing that?” Zeal asked. “If you had to guess?”

“No idea,” Nomad said. “But better than zero, which is what we’ll have if we stop moving.”

Further discussion was interrupted by a sound echoing through the city. A horn being blown. That was unusual, since the Beaconites typically tried to keep the flying town as silent and invisible as they could.

He looked to the other two for explanation.

“Call to gather,” Zeal said, reading the horns, which were bleating out a pattern. “The people have been warned already to gather essential clothing and items in one bag each and leave the rest. This is the final warning. We’re going to start dumping the other ships to conserve power.”

“Already?” Nomad said. “Your people move quickly.”

As soon as he said it, he knew he’d opened himself up for—

Gosh, you think? The knight gives a pointed roll of his eyes—the ones he’d totally have if Nomad hadn’t killed him. They move fast? Really? The people who spend their lives outracing the sun, always one step from being vaporized in a wave of burning light? They move fast?

Well, damn. Who would have thought?

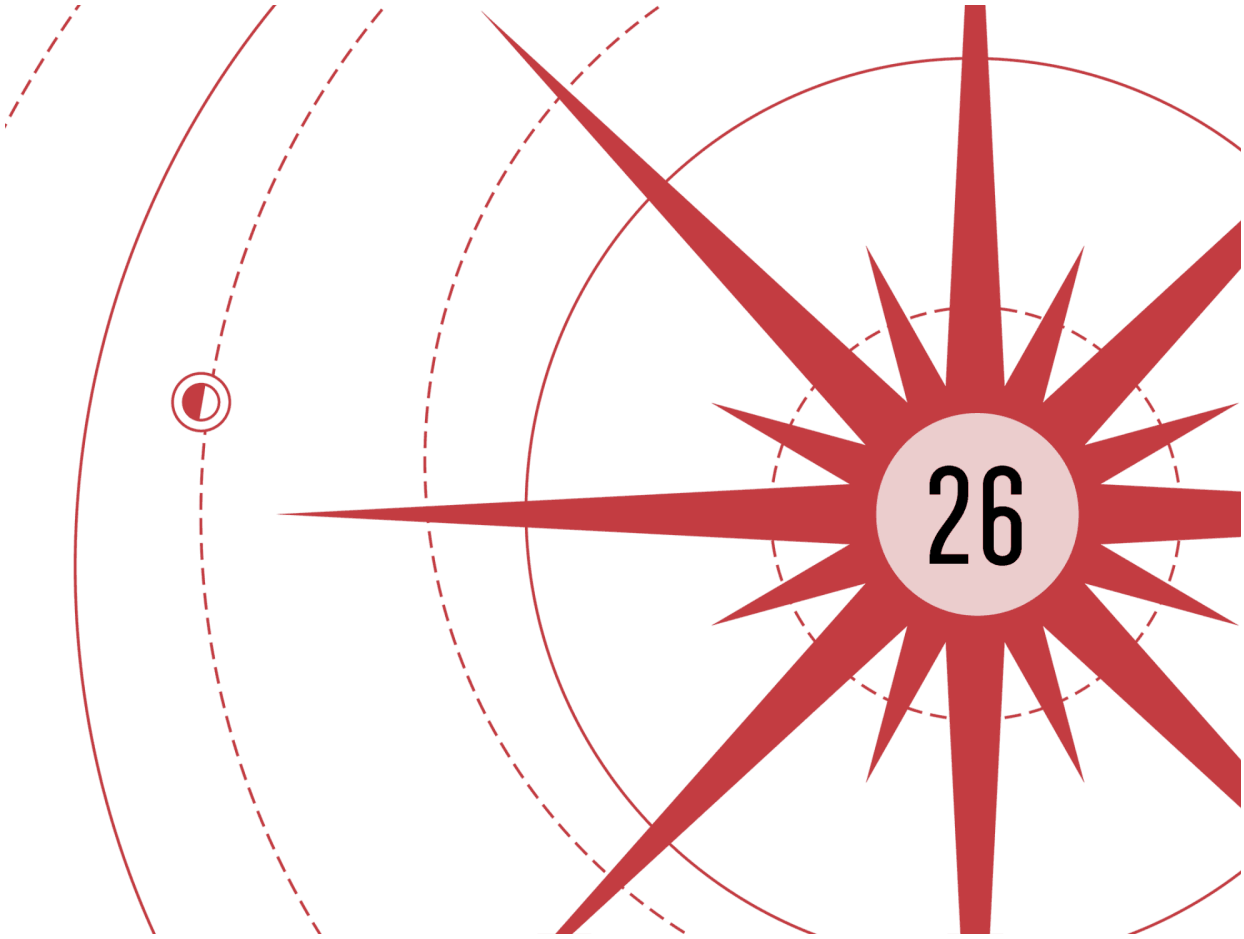
“You really don’t think that’s sarcasm?” Nomad said in Alethi.

It’s just being extra clear.

“I think maybe you go a little far.”

Well, you don’t have a valet who likes to stab himself with bits of unknown power sources for fun. You’ve got to be very deliberate with that sort of person, you know.

Nomad grunted, sliding his notebook into his coat pocket. “Come on,” he said to Rebeke. “I want to check on the engineers and watch their new version explode.”



IT TURNED OUT that Beacon's little engineering team was packed with overachievers. They hadn't made one new prototype, but three, each using parts of his design to modify a small engine.

Only two of these exploded. The third went soaring up into the air, visible only by its blinking light in the darkness—which let some people on a quadcycle with nets zip out and catch it once it fell.

The ascent left the crowd in awe. Most of the people of Beacon had gathered here to watch as they were being evacuated from their homes to the larger central ships.

"It ascended so high," one of them said. "Far past where a ship can normally go…"

"This might work," another said. "It actually *might work*!"

You are so lucky, the hero says, that one of them flew.

"Agreed," Nomad whispered. If all three of those tests had exploded, he might be facing a riot.

The engineers gathered around him as the engine was retrieved. They looked up at him like children, anticipating praise. Storms, he always felt awkward in this sort of situation. Still, he'd been trained in the right words to say. "Excellent job. You just saved this city." He nodded toward the engine. "Flew higher and faster than you thought, eh?"

"It was supposed to hover," Solemnity Divine said. "That's what your design said, at least. It's working *too* well, rocketing into the sky. We'll do another design run on that. But there's one other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

She pointed to several large ships near the center of the city, each dominated by a cylindrical structure three stories high. The water towers. They were like the enclosure for the Chorus, but more industrial. People were being moved into the other ships that had been chosen for the ascent, including the central hub. But not these three.

"Those should contain just enough to get us up the mountains and then let us control our descent," she said. "We'll put them at the edges of the city, uninhabited, and let you be ready to drop those entire ships off once they are empty. But we were hoping for some help on how to insulate and heat them. Against the cold, you know? We'll crash quickly if our propellant freezes once we get past atmosphere."

"You don't know a lot about space or vacuums, do you?" he guessed.

"Uh, shades, no," she said. "Why would we?"

"You don't need to insulate against the cold," he said. "Though do install some heat sinks—particularly on the piping near the engines. We *should* be fine, as we'll be dumping heat prodigiously. That's kind of the point of all this. But I would still worry about those pipes."

"Heat," she said flatly. "You're worried about too much heat? Up that high?"

"Trust me," he said. "If we enter a true vacuum—which we might not actually do—the only way to lose heat is through ejection of matter or through infrared radiation, which is *extremely* slow. There's no convection. No air to conduct heat away. I suggest some fins, if you have time, exposed as much as you can and ready to radiate heat. But my guess is it won't be relevant."

She nodded, taking his word on it, and went off with the others to begin creating new designs. As he stood, watching the people be sorted into the ships, he was surprised to see a break in the clouds above—that was supposedly rare on this side of the sunrise—which let the city pass into the

light of the rings again. They illuminated a landscape of jagged and craggy highlands. Rainwater ran down the rugged stone hills in a thousand little waterfalls.

That's a sight, the knight says with awe. Just water and stones, but on such a scale as to be beautiful. Amazing. Why is it we hate traveling these worlds again?

"Because we're being hunted?"

Right, of course, yes. But…I do wish we could pause a little more often and just enjoy the view.

Enjoying views was for someone who didn't have a gun to his head.

Off to his right, one of the ships broke away from the main bulk of the city and fell off, smashing to the ground below and interrupting the waterfalls. A work crew moved on, having recovered the sunheart from that ship. They entered the next one in the outer ring, and soon it detached and dropped off as well. Then a third. They were inanimate masses of metal, yet in this situation they seemed somehow forlorn, even tragic. Gravestones for the city that was no more.

As he watched, he was joined by Contemplation, walking with a cane—her hair wet, despite the protection of a wide-brimmed hat that had been pinned to it. Surprisingly she *shaded* her eyes against the light of the rings. As if even that dim light bothered her.

"We are getting uncomfortably close to those mountains, Sunlit," she said. "At least that engine of yours seems to be working."

"We should still do a test run," he said. "When we're closer to the peaks, we should take one ship out and let it fly up high to confirm that the engine works as intended."

"We could, perhaps, use the one assigned to you." She nodded to the side, where he could pick out his home on Beacon—a ship with only a few small rooms in it, a wide deck, and a bulbous cab near the back. "It was Elegy's ship, named the *Dawnchaser*. She had it reinforced, so she could try to push into the great maelstrom at the edge of night, drawing ever closer to the sun."

"Why would she want that?"

"It was one of her ideas for survival," Contemplation said. "The Cinder King leaves people to die in the sunlight, then keeps a force of ships patrolling the edge of the great maelstrom—ready to snatch those sunhearts from the ground the moment it is safe to do so. Elegy wondered if there was some way to travel the great maelstrom itself—that boundary between the

rain and the sunlight—and get them before the Cinder King could." She shook her head. "It proved impossible. Even if we could make a ship survive long enough, there was no way to leave the ship and recover the sunhearts."

"The more I hear about Elegy," he noted, "the more I like her."

"Because of failed ideas?"

"Failed ideas lead to successful ones, Contemplation. They're the only thing that does."

She nodded, thoughtful, looking along the slopes, toward that great maelstrom. A place not in the sunlight, but dealing with the effects of its passing. He still hadn't figured out the mechanics of this place. Why that tempest didn't lead to planetwide unlivable weather patterns. Why the sunlight even burned on the level it did in the first place.

"Elegy always did seek the light," Contemplation said. "Then one day the Cinder King rammed it right into her chest…"

Yet another ship collapsed, joining the trail of broken heaps they left behind.

"You know," he said, "in my homeland, we have a story about someone who got too close to the sun. It's a common enough theme across cultures and worlds. It never ends well."

"If it pleases you to reassure me," Contemplation said, hands on her cane, "then you are failing. Since that's essentially what we're going to be doing in a few short hours. But…what is this story you reference?"

He hesitated.

Go on, the knight whispers, it's all right. I want to hear it. Give in a little.

"They came from the east," Nomad said in the local tongue so Contemplation could understand. "Giants, in armor forged of the deepest metals. A horde of death and destruction that ate the land, consumed villages like insects swarming the crops. Ripping. Smashing.

"My ancestors fought them, because what else could you do? Submit to a force that only wanted to devour you and the civilization you stood for? We waited in ranks, each of us smaller than the invaders, but strong as a whole. Walls of honor and training, the only possible way to stem that tide of destruction. They called themselves the Alethi, but we knew them as the Tagarut. The breakers, it means. Those who leave only death.

"It was during the fourth invasion of our Ulutu Dynasty, the dates so old that no scholars can agree on them, but it is generally thought to have happened during the days of our fifteenth emperor. The Tagarut came again,

as they were like the storm itself. Regular. Every generation. Another warlord. Another invasion."

"Giants, you say?" Contemplation said, looking up at him. "Compared to *you*?"

"Yes," he whispered as another part of the city fell. "I've stood among them. Called some friends. They stand closer to the sky than any people I've ever known, Contemplation."

"How do you befriend something so terrible?"

He smiled. "Legend says a change happened during that final invasion of the Ulutu Dynasty. The breakers—tired of falling to our armies—decided to try a new tactic. They decided to conquer the sun.

"'What a lofty place,' they thought. 'It must glow with riches to shine so brightly.' The Tagarut found the highest mountain and began to build scaffolding. They brought their greatest war machines, their towers for taking cities, their ropes, and their Shardbearers. And they climbed up to the sun itself, intent on destroying whatever people lived there, despoiling their land."

"They climbed *to* the sun. So it's a fanciful story." She sounded disappointed.

"Truth and fancy intermingle in almost all stories, Contemplation," he said. "Especially the old ones. You cannot abandon fancy without gutting the truth. But in this story, yes, the central idea is fancy—for they reached the sun, eager to find weapons and tools they could use to finally claim my homeland.

"But the sunlight was too bright. The riches of the vault of the Almighty itself glowed with an intense heat. The Tagarut could not carry the gemstones they found, for they shone so bright as to destroy a man. The proud giants, the terrible warriors, were forced to flee—beaten not by spears or shields, but by the very treasure they sought to claim.

"From that day it was said that their eyes had been bleached by the intense light, like clay cooked too long. Instead of normal dark browns, many Alethi have watery blue or other light eyes. The brilliance of the heavens—where Yaezir himself sits upon his throne—had destroyed their ability to see as common people do. Though they now saw the world washed-out, the gleam of treasure also faded because of this.

"After their loss, the Tagarut began to act like people. No longer lusting only for treasure, they learned to *speak*. Never to write, but still, a measure of civilization came to them. And that is why, to this day, the eyes of their

leaders are light-colored. And why you can finally have a conversation with one—instead of only running for your life."

He looked to Contemplation and found her smiling. She stared forward, watching her city fall to pieces, an ideal abandoned like so many needed to be. "I had not expected to find a storyteller in you, Sunlit."

"I had not expected to become one."

"If it pleases you to say, is that the end? Where is the moral?"

"There is none. It's just a whimsical story."

"Curious. Our stories are never like that. There's always some message. Usually rather heavy-handed, if my bluntness is not too shocking. For some reason, many involve children who get eaten by shades."

"My master likes those kinds of stories," Nomad said. "The kinds with points. It's gotten so he lies and tells people there isn't a point to anything he says, all to keep them from drifting off and ignoring him for preaching to them. But I've found I prefer the ones that are just…stories. No point other than to be interesting."

Contemplation nodded as the building he'd met her in, the one that had been her home here on Beacon, broke away and fell off. "I should like," she whispered, "to live my remaining days in a place where we could afford to tell such stories. A place with no running. A place of peace and…whimsy."

"I understand," he said.

Contemplation and Nomad were forced to retreat from their edge of the city as those ships were dropped off next. They mingled with the many people who stood closer to the center, watching their city be dissected—pieces cut free, like fingers removed to save the arm from gangrene.

Next to him, a child holding her mother's hand pointed at the sky. "Look, Mommy. A new star."

"How would you know, Deborah-James?" her mother asked.

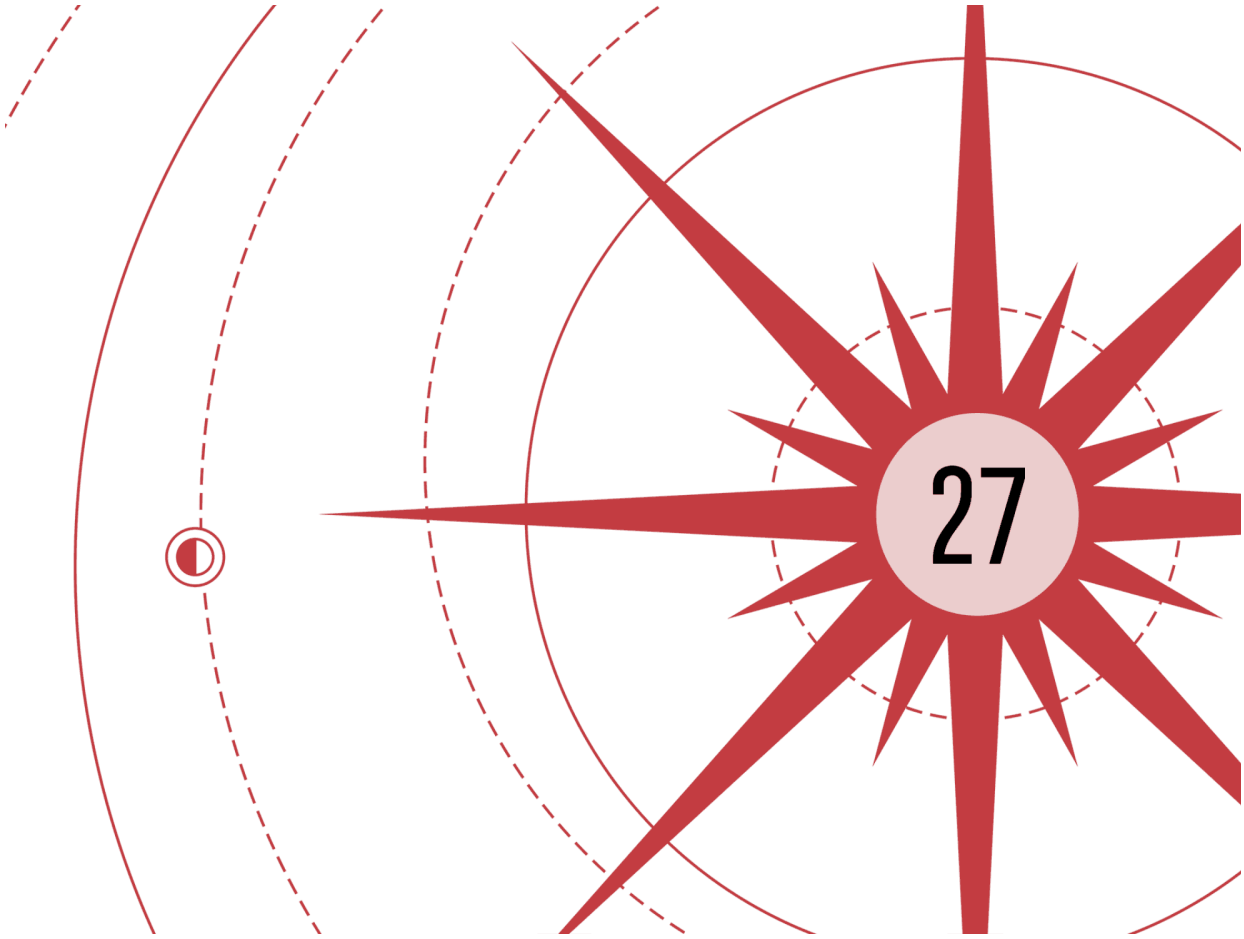
"We study the stars in school," the girl replied. "So we can know where we are. Look, it's new."

Nomad froze, then turned and searched the sky. He found it almost immediately, up and to the right, near the rings. Glowing brightly in reflected sunlight.

Well, storms, the knight whispers. Party is over.

"Huh," Contemplation said, following his gaze. "It *is* a new star. Or…a new part of the ring, maybe? A good sign. A sign, maybe, that Adonalsium blesses our journey?"

“Yeah, no,” Nomad said. “That’s not a new star or an asteroid, Contemplation. That’s a massive warship in low orbit around the planet. They’re called the Night Brigade. Distant cousins of yours, actually. They’re here to kill me.”



"THEY HAVE A SHIP," Contemplation said, "for traveling the stars?" She turned to him and finally seemed to see him for who he was.

"Yes," he said. "Those ships are getting more and more common these days."

"Then perchance…perchance we could ask them for help against the Cinder King? Or we could get passage on their ship or… You're looking at me with an expression that says I've said something insane."

"The Night Brigade commands armies of the dead," he said. "They're largely a mercenary force, known for their brutal efficiency. They're the only army I know that makes you keep on fighting after you've died. They are *not* sympathetic to the problems of local people. To put it mildly."

"Very well," she said. "Then what do we do?"

"Get back under cloud cover," he said, striding toward the hub of Beacon. "Run dark, as you're so good at doing. They won't know immediately where

to find me and will need time to survey the planet. I hoped it would take them longer to follow me to this system, but we've still got time."

"Fine," Contemplation said, barely keeping up. "But let me offer this reminder: you recognize the limited nature of that very time, correct? We are approaching the mountains at a frightening rate."

"We're close to being on schedule," he said. "Two more hours for fabrication and installation."

"An incredible pace."

"But doable," he said, "now that we have a working engine prototype. We don't need to swap out most of your equipment; I designed this to work with the ship structures you have. The hardest part is getting the boilers in place, but those are the simplest parts to fabricate—and should go quickly."

"Another hour or two up the slope," Contemplation continued.

"Again, doable," Nomad said.

"Yes, but the higher you go, the closer to sunrise you get us. And the more likely we are to be killed by it." She pointed at the horizon. "At this point, we flirt with getting so high, we no longer have the shadow of the planet's protection."

It was true. But it *should* work. If they kept the timeline. If nothing went wrong.

He ignored the part of him that whispered that something *always* went wrong.

He found the engineers—who had set up under a tent on the deck, as all the buildings were either being jettisoned or filled with people.

"Time is tight," Nomad said to them. "We need to start fabricating the boilers."

"We aren't ready," Solemnity Divine said. "We need another iteration."

"Not enough time," he said. "Instead of a new engine, we just modify the one we know works."

He summoned Auxiliary as a rough model of a ship, then turned it over on the bottom. His modifications put a boiler near the engine, hanging off the bottom of the ship. It was the only way to install one quickly, since the tops of these ships were living spaces and they didn't have time to cut through.

The water towers were on the tops of the vessels, so his design ran large water lines down to the boilers, which superheated the water using sunhearts, then injected it into the engine proper. That, modified by his schematics, spit the steam and heat out the bottom and generated thrust. Not

the most efficient engine ever, but the concentrated power source made it viable.

"Look," he said, pointing at the water line. "Just put an inhibitor right here. Less water in means less water out, and therefore less thrust. Make this inhibitor variable and wire it into the ship controls, so we can increase or decrease thrust at will."

Solemnity Divine looked at his design, then smacked her forehead. "Right. Of course. Such an easy fix."

It was a time-tested adage in engineering. Why redesign when you could patch the old model? That led to short-term fixes, but that was all they needed.

"We must do more tests," another engineer said. "A stress test at least! We don't know if this design will last longer than a five-minute burn!"

"Install this all on my hovercycle. I'll take it up the mountain, perform a stress test, and make sure it works. While I'm gone, you get these modifications installed on the remaining ships. Don't forget lateral thrusting ability—we'll need to be able to go forward, not just up."

He left them in a buzz and stepped back over to Contemplation, who watched the sky and that blazing light of a warship. He wondered how much load it put on their shields to withstand the power of that sunlight. It seemed like what he'd felt should overwhelm most shields. Again, his mind itched with the worry that something wasn't adding up.

"How dangerous are they?" she asked.

"I know of no force more dangerous. They have been known to leave entire planets desolate. Fortunately the Night Brigade aren't mindless pillagers. They're a precision force and will do whatever their contract—or in this case, their goal—demands."

"Then…they could destroy us all."

"If they wished," Nomad said. "Thing is, though…destroying a planet? That takes *work*, Contemplation. Work they're not getting paid for. They should leave you mostly alone." He paused, then glanced toward the hub. "Hopefully they won't want your shades. They have a thing for ghosts."

She looked to him, pale, worried. "What kind of mercenary force," she said, "can control shades well enough to use them as soldiers?"

"If they get close, I'll leave," he said. "You'll be better for it. Tell the Night Brigade everything—all about me, everything they ask you to tell them. Don't try to hide anything. Playing dumb won't drive them away. Comply with everything they ask you to do; make it easier for them to leave

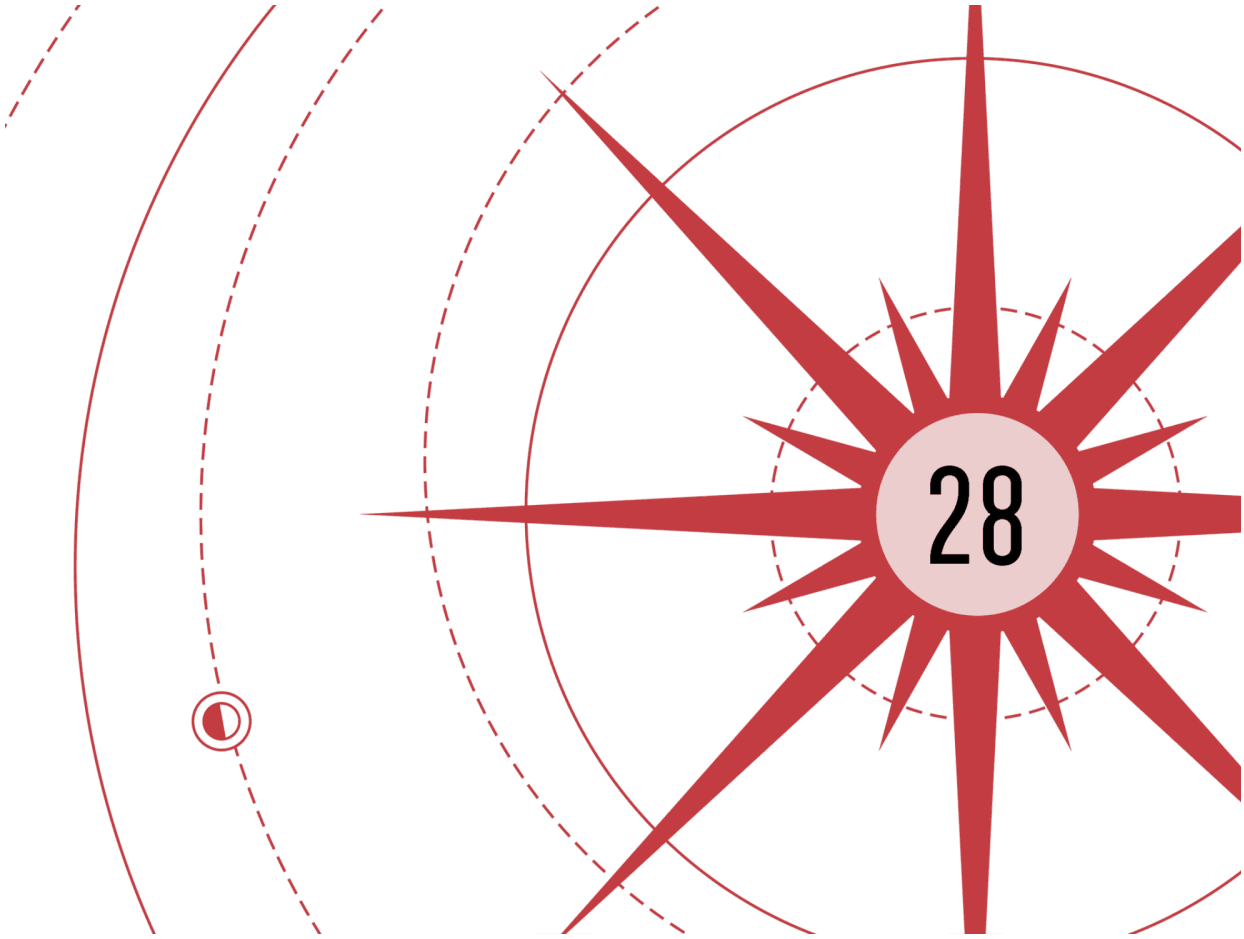
you alive than kill you. It's the only way to escape from them with your limbs—and soul—still attached."

She nodded. "I will tell the others. Adonalsium—or whatever god you follow—bless your flight, Sunlit."

"I'll settle," he said, "for no gods intentionally thwarting me for once."

She seemed troubled by that statement—as well she should.

He worked frantically with the engineers. And a short time later, on the back of a small, battery-powered hovercycle, he raced into the shadows.



POWERFUL FLOODLIGHTS ON the front of the cycle let him see where he was going. A barren rocky mountainside, pocked by holes where trapped gases had blown out. The surfaces were smooth, even glassy, but the jagged edges were unweathered and razor sharp.

As he flew upward, he realized that this was the first time on this planet he'd been truly alone. Even when he'd worked on the schematics, Elegy had been in the room. Now it was just him, Auxiliary, and the darkness. Shaded from the sunlight by a shield that was—by definition—on a planetary scale. He pushed the cycle up the slope and soon encountered snow. His body's protections had already started to come into play, warming him from within, so he didn't notice the air temperature. The snow was his first sign that they were getting to dangerously high elevations.

So, the knight says, is this a good time to ask you what we're going to do if this works? How do we find the hidden Refuge? We spent the better part of a

day searching earlier, and that was when the Cinder King didn't know what we were up to. It's going to be far more difficult this time.

"Perhaps," Nomad said, his breath misting. "Perhaps not. Cities keep to relatively strict latitudes here. I confirmed it with their navigation team. The Cinder King flies Union around the planet in a straight line."

Okay, so?

"So that greatly narrows down the area we have to search," Nomad said.

Sorry, my dutiful valet, the knight intones. I still don't follow your scattered logic. Is the elevation getting to you?

"Right, let me explain it this way," Nomad said, swerving around a large rock formation. "The Cinder King made no regular excursions—he wasn't flying out somewhere to study the entrance. Someone would have noticed if, each rotation, he mysteriously left the city.

"Yet we know that the Cinder King has been trying to get into the Refuge for years. Everyone agrees it was an obsession of his, and some few have even seen the door. So he had to study it in the normal course of their journey, during one of their regular stops to grow crops.

"Since Union always flies in a straight line around the planet, the entrance is somewhere in that specific latitude. In the direct path of the city. A place he can periodically land and study with his closest and most trusted officials, while everyone else grows food."

Right, then. So…that's still a huge area. Somewhere on a long line rounding the planet? It's a small planet, yes, but that's too much ground to search while being chased. We need to know where on that line the entrance can be found.

"Actually we don't need to know that," he said. "Not right now. Because the Cinder King knows it."

Alas, the knight thinks, my sleep-deprived squire has finally lost his mind and is speaking complete gibberish.

"Trust me on this one," Nomad said. "Finding the Refuge isn't going to be difficult. Neither is opening it. Those will be two of the easiest parts of our task."

Then what is the hard part?

Nomad didn't reply. He leaned down over his cycle, checking the time. By everyone's best guesses, he should be over halfway up his climb. Indeed, his speed was decreasing as the conventional engine slowly lost the ability to propel him. He left a melted trail behind him in the ice as he dipped lower,

but he waited to engage the new engine. He needed to get as far as he could with the regular one to conserve propellant for the new one.

So…let's assume we get over the mountain, the knight muses. We somehow don't run Beacon out of energy. You work whatever magic you're planning, and we locate the door and get it open. What then?

What happens when Rebeke and the rest discover that the gate the Cinder King has been trying to open doesn't lead to some mythical, idyllic cavern and utopia of sun-free living? What happens when instead they discover it leads to some small, offworlder research facility?

"Congratulations. You've identified the hard part."

Ah. Right.

"I said I'd get Beacon's leadership through that door," he said. "*That* was my oath. I never said I'd solve their problem with the Cinder King or their bigger problem—the sad fact that it's unlikely their planet has *any* true refuge from the sun. I warned them. They're committed anyway. So it's not my problem."

That doesn't make you sad?

"I can't help everyone. I can barely deal with my own issues. I just have to keep moving forward."

Yes, but…isn't there another way? More we can do?

Once, instead of questions, Auxiliary would have given him a lecture. They'd both been through a lot since those days. Nomad sensed no condemnation in those words. Just sorrow.

He made no response, because the air was well and truly giving out now, and he doubted he could fill his lungs sufficiently. Instead he exhaled and let his body do what it did, protecting him with a little bubble of invisible pressure, a leftover from his old powers. He'd use up Investiture, but this wasn't a major drain.

Beneath him, the engine labored, but the cycle barely stayed in the air—and his progress up the slope had slowed to a crawl. So he engaged the new engine—really just a complement to the old system.

It worked perfectly, shooting down a jet of superheated steam and lifting him a good ten feet higher above the frozen landscape. He'd gotten above the perpetual cloud cover here, so he could finally see the stars. He took a moment to admire the rings—which, unless he was remembering wrong, were another oddity. The few other planets he'd visited with rings always had them at the equator, but not these. Strange rings, strange gravity, strange sunlight. What a bizarre planet.

Unfortunately, the rings reminded him of the ship up there, newly arrived. No. He couldn't think about how close the Night Brigade was right now. He focused instead on the path.

His eyes adjusted, and he dimmed the floodlight. The snow had fallen away also—not enough atmosphere. Now it was just him and the grey stone, like a ramp up toward the cosmere itself. These scattered peaks weren't high, around a thousand feet, despite their steep incline. But just because this peak was relatively low didn't mean it wasn't worth climbing, and he still felt proud as he neared the top.

He cut the engine at the summit, settling down gently. His feet were silent as they touched the stone. There was no appreciable atmosphere here to carry the sound waves. He enjoyed the moment, parked at the very top of the world, surveying the curvature of the small planet and looking out over the smoldering clouds. The sun was still a ways off, not even illuminating the horizon.

Higher mountains rose to either side of him. He couldn't spot a lower pass the city could sneak through. The fugitives would have to come all the way up this slope. On the back side, the slope was even steeper—cutting downward in a way that would have been improbable in a normal mountain range. Weathering below would not have needed long to collapse this higher section. But here, the peaks only had to last a day until they were remade.

He turned toward the stars again. They'd always seemed so friendly to him. So full of stories. How many of those stars had he visited now? Just a fraction of them, and yet the cosmere had begun to feel like a small place. Instinctively he tried to find Taln's Scar, but the patch of red wasn't visible from this angle.

Do you remember, the knight asks, when you first realized the Night Brigade was chasing you?

Nomad sent annoyance through the bond.

Ah, that's right, the hero realizes. You can't speak up here. How special… how delightful. I can talk, and you can't interrupt? You know, for a lowly valet, you certainly do monopolize a great deal of the speaking opportunities.

More annoyance. So much annoyance.

Lovely! Well, I'm going to assume you remember. It's not a thing one forgets lightly. You walked right up to them and essentially turned yourself in.

Nomad had mistakenly assumed that they wouldn't be interested in him because he no longer held the Dawnshard. He thought he'd send them on their way, misunderstanding cleared up. Storms, he'd been a fool. It was a similar attitude that had originally landed him in the army on Roshar, carrying siege equipment.

Do you ever miss the way you were back then?

Indifference. No, that naivete had almost gotten him killed so many times. In the case of the Night Brigade, he'd completely missed the danger. He'd soon learned that, with their twisted arts, they could kill him and fashion a spike from his soul that would lead them to the person he had given the Dawnshard. To them, Nomad was a crucial link in a very important chain. And he was far more useful dead than alive.

Yeah, I thought you wouldn't want to go back to the person you'd been. And you know, I don't miss those days either.

This surprised him, and he sent that emotion. He thought for sure that Auxiliary regretted what he'd become.

What's life about, if not growth? I don't like the person I was back on Roshar either, before we knew each other.

I like change, Nomad. My kind were too static for too long, particularly we highspren. And sometimes the way you talk makes me think you believe, or can pretend, that you are an entirely different person now.

But you aren't. You're still that man. The capacity for what you've become was always there. I guess that sounds depressing or negative, but I don't mean it so. If we pretend that we're a different person each day, then what good does it do? It implies we can't truly change. That we don't learn. We just turn into another being. Does that make sense?

Barely.

I just want to say…I'm glad to be here. Seeing this all with you. Even with the cost, I'm glad to be here.

Something about that twisted Nomad up inside. Auxiliary was barely there, a fragment of the being he'd once been, so brilliant and capable. What kind of damaged individual would be *glad* to have gone through what he had?

But then again, the view from atop the world…looking out over infinite clouds, with stars overhead…

Storms. Nomad couldn't be proud of who he was now. He was a man who couldn't ever go home—not because of the army that chased him, but

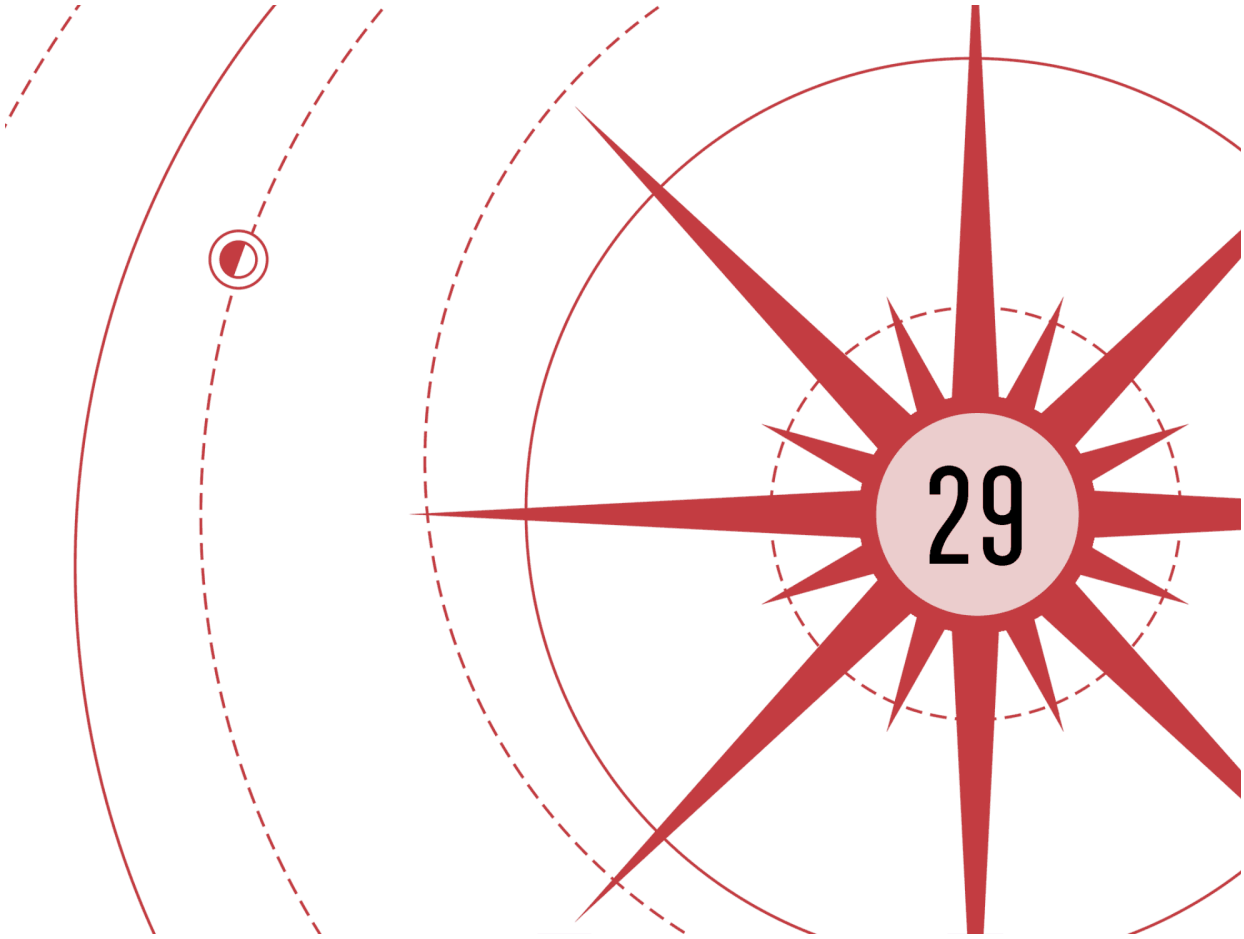
because…because he would never be able to face his friends as the person he'd become.

No, he wasn't someone *different*. He was, indeed, still *himself*. That was what made it painful.

Auxiliary always had been the perceptive one. But he also often misunderstood people. And that was certainly the case with Nomad just then.

He activated the steam jet again, turned, and drove back down into the atmosphere until he could change the engine over to its regular configuration.

By the time he arrived at Beacon, they were ready, excess weight jettisoned, new engine components in place. He'd be going back up that mountain again, this time with a hundred and thirty-five people relying on him not to doom them to a silent death.



"THROTTLE IS RIGHT here," Jeffrey Jeffrey said, scratching at his beard as he moved down the control panel, explaining it to Nomad. "And here, this will let you rotate the city. We only have one primary thruster set to move you laterally. The engineers said that should be enough."

"We don't have to move far forward," Nomad agreed. "Most of the distance we need to cover is vertical."

The two of them stood in the cab of his ship, a smaller room off the main chamber where he'd done his research earlier. They'd positioned his ship in a strange location—locked right on top of the hub, above the Chorus. Underneath his feet, through the metal, those shades were now accompanied by tens of people packed into the space surrounding the Reliquary.

Through the windshield, he could see a forlorn, reduced version of Beacon. A mere twelve ships, arrayed in a circle around the hub—three of them being the giant water-container ships at the outside. He'd imagined it as a flying disc when they'd been assembling it, but "disc" misleadingly

evoked a shape too elegant, too smooth, too intentional. No, this was more like a flying barge made of bulky, warehouse-like ships.

It was vaguely circular, with a central bump one story taller than the rest of it. And he was at the top, such as it was. Jeffrey Jeffrey showed him how to rotate his ship in place, which *was* handy. He could turn the windshield to look back toward the horizon, or keep his eyes forward, aimed at the mountains. A little white-and-green radar screen showed him their proximity to the mountain.

"Here are the controls to drop the water ships once they're empty," Jeffrey Jeffrey said, indicating a control panel that was newly wired in place. "That should be everything."

"What are those controls?" he asked, gesturing to a group on the left of the panel.

"Those control the prospector device underneath your ship," Jeffrey Jeffrey explained. "Not relevant now."

Right. Elegy, before becoming a Charred, had been an explorer. A woman who pushed the limits, both socially and physically. She'd struck out into the shadows with an entire city relying on her. Her ship had been a prospector, intended to help her find signs of Investiture in the great maelstrom between the sun and the darkened land they now flew through. "Thank you," Nomad said. "You should run along now and get someplace safe."

"I could stay," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "We had time, so we sealed your room as well—best we could. It will leak more since we made your door able to open easily. But there *should* be enough air in here the entire flight…"

"Too dangerous," Nomad said. "I can handle this."

"And her?" Jeffrey Jeffrey nodded back to the main chamber of the ship, where Elegy was still chained in place. At least now she could sit down in the corner, rather than being held flat against the wall.

There was no other good place to keep her. They'd jettisoned the ship that had doubled as a jail. He didn't like the idea of letting her stay in a room with innocents.

"She'll be fine there," Nomad said. "Her Investiture should let her survive without oxygen for a while, if it comes to that."

"All right," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. He lingered, looking out through the window—all other windows on the other ships had been covered with steel, welded into place, out of concern that the seals at the corners of the windows wouldn't hold the pressure. So this was Jeffrey Jeffrey's last sight of the

outside world until, hopefully, they touched down on the other side of the mountains.

"Adonalsium's fortune gaze upon you," the man said to Nomad. "And… may you always outrun the sun. In a very present and immediate way, Sunlit."

He left, and a few seconds later, Nomad saw him enter one of the other ships. The door closed, but they'd leave the intakes open until Nomad indicated they needed to seal themselves in.

The city had become a ghost town. A black, huddled collection of structures, lit only by emergency lights. Occupied only by the silent and the dead.

He took the controls and started Beacon upward in the darkness. In the shadow as they were, there wasn't much to see of the mountain, but the radar gave him enough to fly by. He mostly just went up. There was no need to hug the slope.

This feels…more boring than it should.

"Good," Nomad said, watching the throttle—keeping them flying on regular engines at close to full power. "We want this all to be as boring as possible."

How long has it been, the knight asks, since you've been in command of this many people?

"Command? Don't call it that. I'm flying a ship."

You're in charge right now, which makes you captain of this ship. That's a command position.

"Not the same thing."

It isn't your fault, you know, what happened. Events were largely outside your control.

"Never said they weren't."

You still carry that burden.

"It's a small one."

And yet you've always avoided being put into a leadership position again.

"Seems best for everyone that way," he said, nudging the ship a little farther along to the east, up the slope, away from the sun. Still climbing. He waited to see what kind of issue Auxiliary would raise next.

Instead a voice came from behind him.

"You have someone in your head too, don't you?" Elegy asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, sitting cross-legged, wrists chained together and hooked to the wall. Her cinderheart glowed a soft red-orange.

“I can see it in you,” she said. “The others say you’re praying. But you’re not. You’re talking to someone in your head. You can hear them, like I used to.”

“Yes,” Nomad agreed. “It’s similar, I guess.”

“Does the voice tell you who to kill?”

“He’s told me to jump off a cliff a few times,” Nomad said with a smile. She obviously didn’t get the joke. “No, Elegy. The voice is my friend. The tool I summon on occasion? That’s his body.”

“Why is he in your head too?”

“It’s complicated. These days, though, he calls me his squire or his valet.” At her confusion, he explained further. “Auxiliary—my friend—has a body, but he can’t control it…directly. Instead he sits in my mind, like a passenger. So he jokes that I’m his valet—his palanquin carrier, you might say—to move him wherever he wants to go.”

And you’re a very ineffective one, I must say. Rarely ever do what I tell you. Maybe we should get you one of those cinderhearts. Then perhaps you’d be more pliant.

“Why don’t you fight?” Elegy asked.

“Who?”

“Everyone,” she said. “The voice held me back, most of the time, then let me loose when there was someone to fight. Now…I want to fight everyone. You said you feel it. I can see you feel it. So why don’t you fight?”

“I choose my fights,” Nomad replied. Outside, the air was thinning. He didn’t need to check the pressure gauge when the engines were so obviously laboring. He gave the order, and the people sealed themselves into their cabins, closing the vents.

He had about two hours, from this point, until they started to run out of oxygen.

“I don’t understand,” Elegy said. “Choose what fights? How?”

Can’t you just explain to her that there’s more than fighting, the hero asks.

He could. But if there was one thing his master had taught him, it was how to lead a conversation. He still did it as naturally as he performed a spear kata.

“I don’t want to fight the people here,” Nomad said. “There’s no challenge to it, for one thing. For another, I want nothing from them.”

“I want the fight from them,” Elegy said. “If you let me free, there would be nothing for me to choose. I would fight you. I’d fight everyone on this ship.”

“And then what?”

“And then…” She trailed off.

“Then you’d die up here in the cold,” Nomad said. “Alone. Great. What have you earned? What have you accomplished?”

“I…”

“You’re going to have to learn to find something else to live for, Elegy.”

“Something…else…?”

“A reason,” Nomad said. “A purpose. Once you have that, you’ll know when to fight, and why. You’ll fight *for* something.” He met her eyes again. “You aren’t going to be able to recover who you once were. I’m reasonably certain she is gone, like a book burned to ashes.

“But you can’t merely be what you are now. If you keep on this way, you’ll end up dead. Probably fast. You’ll howl in rage to the sun, unsatisfied, because the fight was short and pointless. But that fire inside of you isn’t going to go away either. So find something to care about, a reason to channel it. That’s my best advice to you.”

“Then what is your purpose? Why do *you* live?”

Damnation. He’d walked right into that. Perhaps he hadn’t digested Wit’s lessons as well as he’d thought.

“I used to live for my friends,” Nomad said softly. “But those days are gone. Then I lived to protect the cosmere—for a brief time harboring one of its most dangerous secrets. Now…now I live to run.”

She frowned. “And that’s…satisfying, why?”

“It isn’t,” he admitted. “I guess I’m still trying to learn the same lesson.”

“So that’s why you understand,” she said and settled back, closing her eyes. “I see. Yes, I see. Thank you.”

Storming woman. He had the sense that, before all of this, she’d probably been *outrageously* self-righteous. Her memories might not have survived, but some of that attitude did.

I’m embarrassed, the knight admits, how much better she just did my job than I have lately.

“Your job?” he asked in Alethi. “Since when has it been your job to moralize at me?”

Since forever, Nomad. You threw out your conscience years ago, I know, though I never had a chance to meet her. That left the position vacant, regardless, so I appointed myself to fill it. I’d ask how I’m doing, but…well, you are clear evidence of how much of a rookie I still am.

Nomad grunted, smiling despite himself, and checked the elevation. They were barely moving now. So he took a deep breath and engaged the new engines. The entire city *jolted* as if it had been struck by a giant hammer. Then it started upward again.

He released his breath, and he, Elegy, and Auxiliary flew for a time in silence. He felt oddly at peace as they did. He was still running, of course, still being hunted. Yet he could pretend this was a lull, with nothing to do but climb. After a half hour or so of this, however, he noticed their elevation wasn't matching up to projections.

They were moving more slowly than he'd anticipated. He pushed the engines to full power, and though they started moving a little faster, the acceleration soon tapered off.

Around them, the cloud cover was falling away, the mountainside coming into full view. Ringlight bathed the landscape.

Are we even moving?

"We are, but slowly," he said, checking other readings.

He silently urged the ship to rise. And it did, with increasing slowness. He'd miscalculated somewhere. Theoretically they should be going *faster* with each passing moment, as they burned away more water and ejected it from the ship. Instead they were slowing. Not rapidly, but enough that he doubted they'd make the summit before their water ran out.

Nomad? Auxiliary asked. *What's wrong?*

"I don't know," he admitted, checking the throttle controls to make sure they weren't jammed or something. "It could be any number of *tens* of things. Maybe the seals we used don't work in extreme low pressure and are starting to leak. Maybe this method puts too much strain on the engines, making them overheat. Usually you discover these kinds of quirks through stress tests and numerous prototypes. But…we didn't have time for any of that."

He watched the ominous horizon in the rear distance. Light started to stain it, the sun creeping from its den, hungry.

He felt like the worst of the ten fools in that moment. He'd led these people to their deaths, and he didn't even know where his miscalculation was. He knew from sad experience in engineering that these kinds of little problems were numerous—and when one cropped up in an early test, you usually had to use the wreckage to work out what had gone wrong…

Then a wave of relief hit him as he remembered that he'd built in a failsafe for this. He reached over, hitting the button to jettison the first empty

water-carrying ship. It tumbled free, and the larger collection of ships jolted at the sudden loss of mass. Beacon's gyroscopes accounted for the sudden change in the ship's shape and mass, keeping them level as their speed increased.

Not quickly enough. He checked the water gauges and found that the second container ship was also basically empty. He hit the button to eject that one.

Nothing happened.

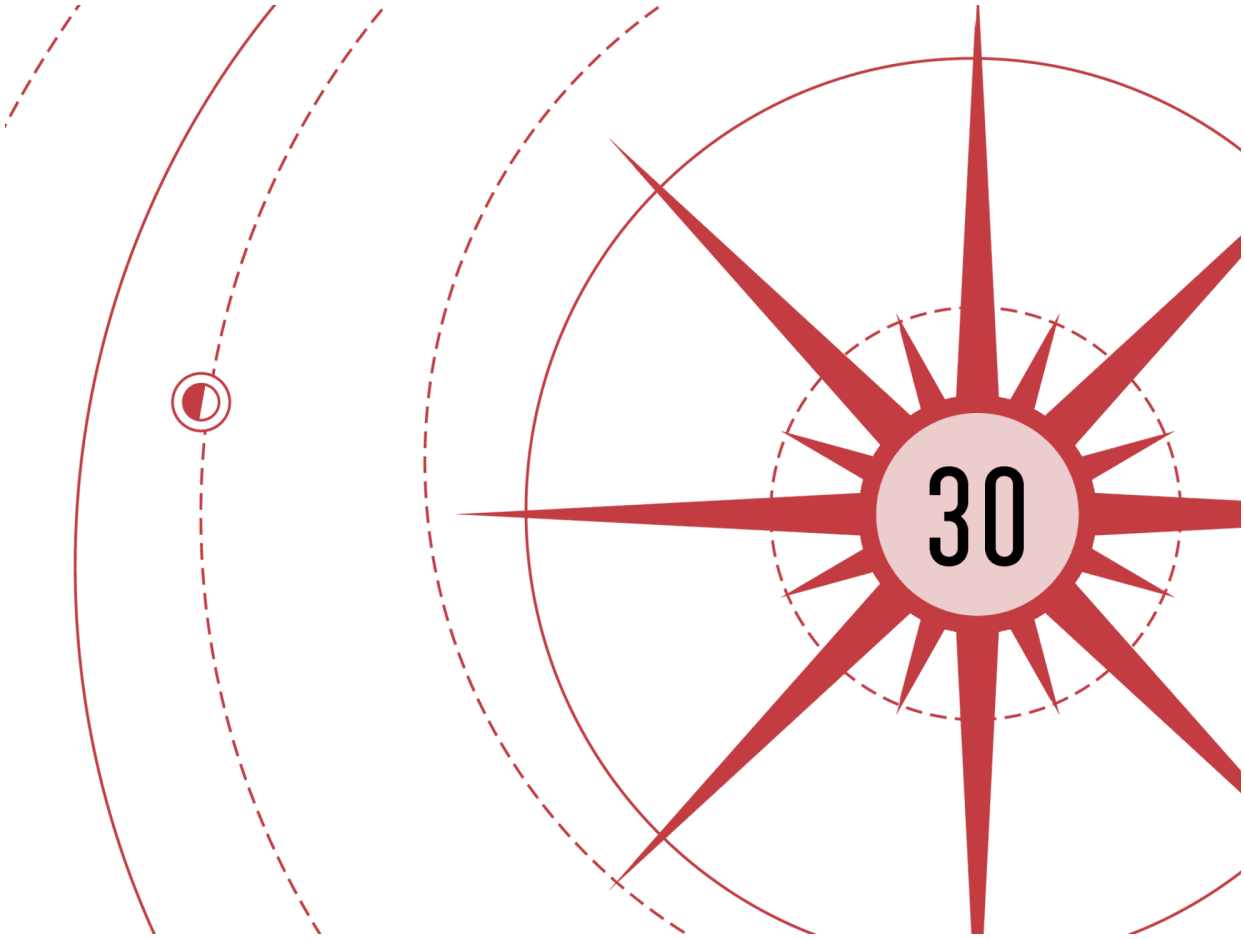
He hit it again.

Nomad?

"The unlocking mechanism is jammed on that second ship," he said, peering through his windshield to see it still latched in place. "We need to jettison it immediately and hope that drops enough weight to speed us up."

Okay. But…how? Can you hotwire the system?

Nomad took a deep breath. "No. We're going to have to go out and do it by hand."



"THIS COULD BE dangerous for you," he said to Elegy, moving through the main cab. "I'm sorry. I'll try to close the door quickly and not lose too much of your air."

"Why do you care…about me?" she asked, frowning.

He stopped by the door. "Human beings have a natural sense of decency, Elegy. Yours might have been burned away. I know a little of what that's like, but it's not how we're meant to be."

"You said you used to live for your friends," she said. "To fight for them. Because of decency?"

"That and so much more," he said. "Aux, I'm not going to be able to speak out there. You'll have to do your best to interpret my emotions."

Understood, trusty valet.

Once upon a time, their bond had been close enough for Nomad to speak his thoughts directly back to Auxiliary. That ability, like several others they'd enjoyed, vanished when Auxiliary had mostly died.

Nomad threw open the door. Of course, that resulted in rapid decompression—but he was prepared. His long coat whipped around him as he jumped out, then threw his weight against the door, slamming it closed and doing up the lock. He wasn't certain how much air he'd retained for Elegy. Hopefully it—plus her natural Investiture—would be enough.

For the time being, he had to worry about the entire city. He ran to the side of the city-ship and reached the empty water vessel. Slow-moving, weighty, intended to move through fields and water the crops—it now hung tipped to the side, deadweight. He immediately figured out the problem.

Ice. They had moved up through the same icy snow he'd noticed during his solo flight—but had spent much more time in it. The deck was crusted in ice, and the locking mechanisms that held the ships together obviously weren't designed for such cold environments. They had frozen over, and many refused to unlatch when activated.

He summoned Aux as a crowbar and found one that hadn't unlatched, ramming Aux in place and throwing his weight against the tool. With some work, he got that lock and the next one undone.

The ship didn't fall, though all of the latches on the deck were now uncoupled. Storms. The locks underneath the vessel, connecting it to the main body of the ship, must also be iced over.

That's…bad, isn't it?

There was only one solution. He had to find a way to undo the latches on the *underside* of Beacon. While flying. He dismissed Auxiliary and ran to his cycle at the edge of the city-ship. They hadn't refilled the water compartment. Damnation.

Damnation, Auxiliary said. *What do we do?*

He popped the seat on his cycle, getting out the towline he'd seen Rebeke use earlier. He threw the coil of reinforced metallic rope over his shoulder, formed Auxiliary as a hook and chain, then stepped up to the side of the ship, standing on a portion that wasn't part of the water ship, just in case it broke free. He gazed down at the ringlit mountainside.

Oh boy, the knight says in a joyless monotone. This is going to be fun.

He hooked Auxiliary in place, then swung down over the side of the ship, descending until he found a secure handhold. He grabbed it, holding on to the metal, then reformed Auxiliary, this time with a knob replacing the hook. He wedged that into a gap nearby in the metal and reformed Auxiliary to fit exactly so that it couldn't just pull free.

That gave Nomad a secure anchor to climb down farther, until he dangled just below Beacon. He looked out across the underside of the composite ship, where eight jets had been spaced equidistantly around the larger one underneath the hub. The tenth ship was being used for lateral motion, its jet tilted up and firing toward the horizon.

When he'd hit the release button, the water ship's engine had disengaged. So it had become an even bigger deadweight, now not contributing thrust to the flight. He hung there for a moment, peering past the brilliant red-orange engines spitting superheated steam in geyseral jets, thinking about the careful balancing of thrusters that was required to get all these engines working in concert. Too much thrust on one side would have flipped the city, but the Beaconite machinery compensated for that distribution instinctively. Zeal had mentioned, when he'd asked, that the Chorus helped somehow.

Did they have something like a rudimentary Awakened difference engine doing these calculations? Fashioned by a shade? That would be…

He shook out of it. No time for such thoughts. If he didn't break that deadweight free, the entire city would slam into the mountain—leaving them all stranded until they were engulfed in a deluge of sunlight that would melt the city-ship to slag.

He would have to reach those locks, which meant traversing across the *bottom* of Beacon until he reached the proper location. It was mostly flat, though it had plenty of nooks for him to lock in Auxiliary's hooks. However, moving around down here would take him uncomfortably close to at least one of those scalding jets.

At least he wasn't deafened by their roar. It was barely there in this thin air. The near vacuum would also insulate him from the worst of the heat, as long as he avoided direct contact, which was another small comfort. He grabbed the bottom lip of the side of Beacon, then dismissed Auxiliary, hanging by one hand—for a few heart-pounding moments—above a drop of hundreds of feet.

By now, the people of Beacon might be getting light-headed from the lack of oxygen. Some might be slipping into unconsciousness already. So if he fell here, they'd never wake up. And his long run would be stopped not by the Night Brigade, but by the day's deadly sunlight.

He reformed Auxiliary into a chain with hooks on both ends, then swung under the ship and hooked Auxiliary on a valve. Then he took the other end of the chain and used that to swing by one arm to latch that hook into another location. Each time he swung, he would make the end fuzz to

indeterminacy and then reform, locked into place in an indentation on the bottom of the ship.

It was eerie, doing this in silence, Investiture helping his body compensate for the low pressure and lack of oxygen. He couldn't do that indefinitely, as his stores would eventually run out, but he had plenty for this task. Keeping him alive, renewing his muscles so they didn't fatigue and drop him. He used this arm-under-arm swing to maneuver slowly around the nearest of the jets—a blinding column of superheated steam and light, violent and powerful, that could be felt as infrared radiation in the vacuum.

The fact that he felt anything from this jet was an indication of just how much energy was pouring out of it. He rounded it and reached the place where the deadweight ship was locked onto the rest of Beacon. There, he hung for a moment to gather his wits.

Once, he'd found it difficult during moments like this not to gasp for air, but his training had often required him to hold his breath. The power that had fed him during his youth escaped when he breathed, so he learned to hold it in, even during frantic moments of battle.

He started forward again, eyes on the first lock just ahead. He undid his left-hand hook and swung out—but his right-hand hook had not been latched in as well as he'd thought. In a moment of visceral terror, he felt it slip. Storms! In a panic, he seized the chain with both hands as it went taut.

He jolted, clinging to the tenuous chain, the sweat on his skin instantly vaporizing in the low-pressure environment and boiling away. The chain ground on the steel above him, slipped, then caught again—but that second jolt made him drop a little farther, his fingers barely clinging to the end of the chain.

Damnation, Auxiliary said. *Nomad. Hang on. Please.*

Nomad tried to stabilize the hook, mentally commanding it to grow wider—but his mistake had been placing it on a little rim that Auxiliary couldn't easily form around to get a proper grip.

Beneath him, the bleak slope of the mountain was getting ever closer. And in the distance, the very first lights of false dawn grew on the horizon.

Nomad, Auxiliary said. *It may be time to do something drastic. I have… strength left. You could fly again. Only a little, but perhaps enough to—*

No. *NO!* He thought it forcefully.

They both knew this truth, but had never said it out loud. In the past, he'd burned away Auxiliary in a moment of power, ignorant of what he'd been doing—of what he'd been capable of doing. His body had sought whatever

energy it could find, and his friend—made of pure energy—had been too convenient a source.

All these years, Auxiliary had existed as a mere remnant of what he'd once been. But it was the most important fragment—Auxiliary's personality and mind—that remained. Fuel, if needed.

Never, Nomad thought.

I can't let you die, Auxiliary said. *I can't let the city crash. If you could fly —*

In response, Nomad started climbing. Hand over hand, determined, feverish. With cracked, dry hands, trembling at the thought of…of again…

Auxiliary fell silent, but Nomad knew what his friend would do if the chain slipped. The unspoken horror.

NEVER AGAIN, Nomad thought, reaching the bottom of the ship and slamming the other end of the chain into a more secure position. He dangled there as sweat beaded on his face and instantly vanished, fleeting kisses of cool.

Thank you, Auxiliary said, *for caring.*

Nomad tried to send an impression of anger—of insistence that Auxiliary never bring up this topic again. He swung once more to reach the proper lock, then unwound the tow cable. It looked like all four of the locks on the bottom side had frozen closed. But hopefully he wouldn't need to undo them all before the weight of the ship snapped the others.

Now what? the hero asks hesitantly.

In response, Nomad used the tow cable to tie himself into place. He gave the line a little slack, so he hung down four feet beneath the ship. Then he formed Auxiliary into a large metal pole with a flat end.

Nomad wedged the flat end into the lock, then heaved, putting his entire weight on the bar. Auxiliary's physical form was literally deific—and wouldn't break or bend under any natural circumstances. But the Beaconite engineers had done their jobs well, and this was *not* a good angle from which to pry open the mechanism.

Worse, friction was working against him. Above, the locks had popped free easily, but that was because the angle of the ship detaching had helped pull them free. That same angle was putting weight *on* these locks, making them difficult to wedge apart.

Nomad. The mountain.

He didn't need to look. Yes, they were close—and drifting closer. Only a few dozen yards from collision. Moving slowly, but inevitably. He heaved

harder, but nothing happened. And he worried he'd made a miscalculation again. These ships, when they locked into place, probably had mechanisms at the sides—not just the top and bottom. The latches he was trying to open, they might not even be the most important part of what kept the ships together. Too flimsy.

There might be reinforced clamps or docking mechanisms he couldn't see. If that were true…

He tried again, angling the long crowbar differently. Nothing. He needed something better.

Storms. The people. They *needed* him.

But he couldn't…he couldn't make a weapon. He…

Not a weapon, Auxiliary seemed to whisper. *Just another tool. To protect the city, Nomad.*

The end of the crowbar sharpened.

In that second, he held something he'd not held in quite some time. A symbol from Nomad's past. The implement of a warrior, practiced in secret, then displayed in grandeur. Sharp enough to slice through metal. He rammed it upward into the gap, slashing free the lock and something above, a bar or mechanism locking the ships together.

That was enough. The ship lurched, then broke free and crashed to the barren stone beneath, tumbling along the mountainside, ripping up stone as it went. Nomad hung on as Beacon shook, its primary engine roaring and spraying heat in a column of light and fury. He felt the ship rise faster, though it was almost imperceptible from his vantage.

Heart pounding, Nomad unhooked himself and used Auxiliary to reach the perimeter of the ship. Soon after, he climbed onto the metal deck. He stood tall, looking toward that terrible horizon. Sunlight trying to break free as the ship rose to meet it. Higher. Higher.

The right side of the ship *ground* against stone, sending tremors through the entire structure. Nomad fell to his knees, still looking west at that terrible light.

The grinding stopped as the ship finally, barely, crested the top of the mountain.

We did it, the knight rejoices. Nomad, we did it. But we're still rising.

Storms. Nomad turned and scrambled for the control building, terrified that they'd get this close to their goal, only to end up rising so high that—

Sunlight bathed him as the ship left the shadow of the planet. Calm, warm, *ordinary* sunlight.

What the hell?

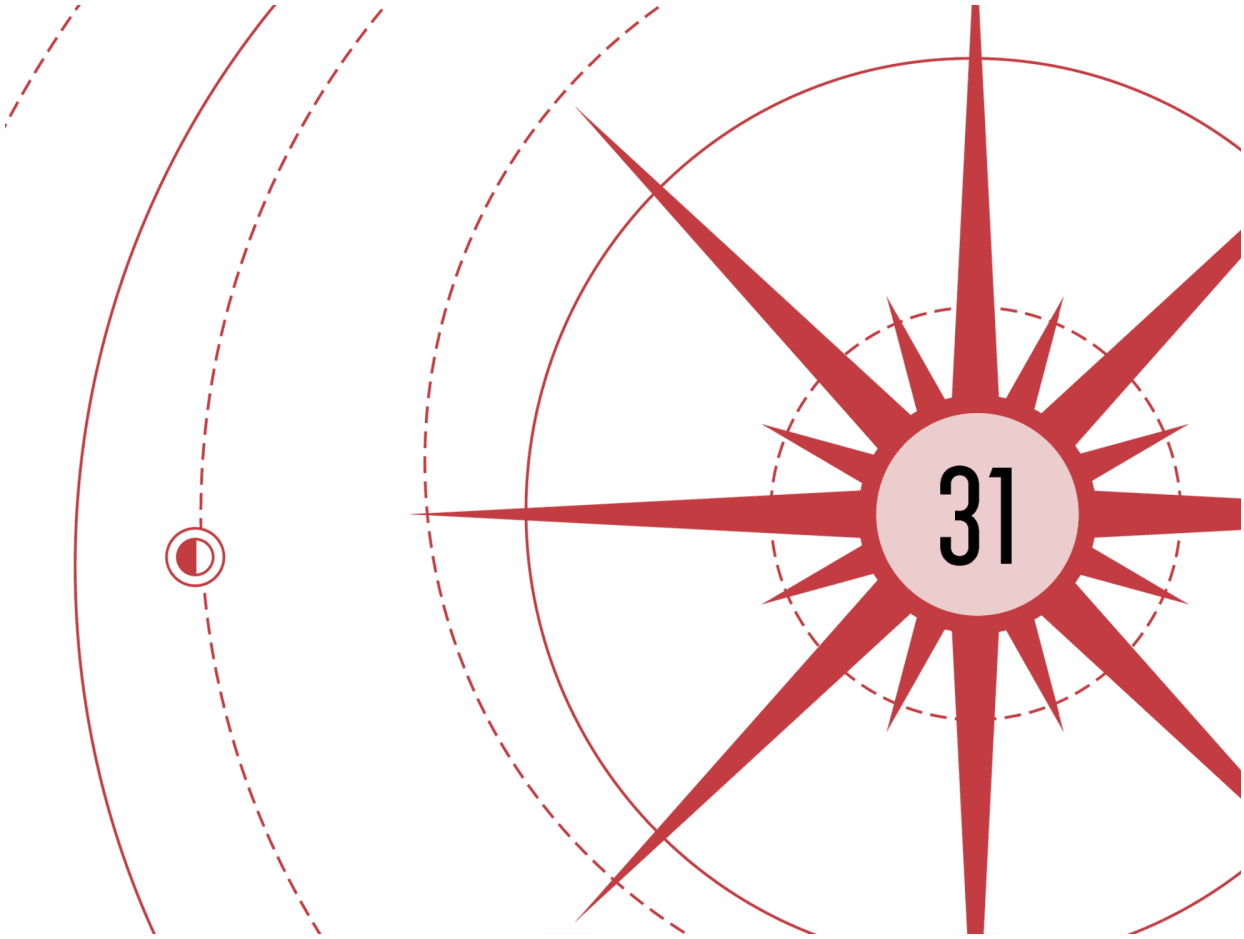
He stood there for a long moment, suspended above the mountaintop, but nothing happened to him or Beacon. He'd noticed earlier that the Night Brigade ship had approached without its shield being overwhelmed. What was going on? Why could they hang there, in the light, and not be destroyed?

Damnation. He hated working on so little information. If the solar strength was extremely high, it would have ripped away the atmosphere of this planet, so far as he understood. And why were there always mountains at the poles? Shouldn't the planet, constantly being melted, form a sphere? Or was it naturally an oval, with gravity pulling more air to the equator, making it seem like there were mountains at the poles when, in reality, those were just the edges of the oval sticking out of the atmosphere? Was that even possible?

As he pondered, Beacon stopped vibrating. He frowned at the strange stillness. The engines had cut out. What did that mean? Why would they…

They were out of water. No more propellant.

With a sickening twist deep in his core, he felt the entire Beacon complex begin to fall down the back side of the mountains—with no engines to slow its descent.



THIS WAS BAD.

It was also great, because the ship had managed to cross over the tip of the mountain before running out. So as they plummeted, they slipped into the mountain's shadowed shelter.

He was *not* ready for an uncontrolled descent, though. Storms. They'd run out of water far faster than he'd planned. Everything he and the engineers had done involved enormous amounts of guesswork. That considered, they were lucky it had gone as well as it had.

In growing darkness, he crossed the deck of the ship. At least up here he didn't have to worry about being swept off by the wind. He fell at the same speed as the ship, and though he had to use Auxiliary at some points to give him handholds, he eventually made it back to the hub and climbed up to reach the *Dawnchaser*'s door.

He'd anticipated hitting the mountain on the way down, but so far, nothing. The steep, craterlike cliff on this side was a tiny blessing. He hauled

himself through the door, noticing Elegy unconscious—hopefully *just* unconscious—in the corner. In his absence, the cabin had depressurized completely.

He pulled himself through the room, now fully in free fall, gravity meaningless for the next few moments. Engines. He had to get the regular engines going. He was starting to hear wind whistling outside the still-open door. Once they got back into thicker air, the regular engines should work again. Only, once he reached the control panel, he found them stalled completely. Running out of water—which had also been acting as a coolant—had caused them to lock up.

Storms. He looked at the button that Jeffrey Jeffrey had explained, in passing, was for reigniting the system. It all came down to this? After all his effort, it was about pushing a button?

That, and waiting.

The engines wouldn't start if he pushed it too soon. Storms, they might not start anyway. Running out of coolant while superheated in a vacuum… that was the sort of thing that completely destroyed machinery.

He resisted the urge to pound that button repeatedly. Warning lights indicating overheating flashed all across the panel. Air. They needed air. That would cool the engines as they fell. Allow the heat to dissipate.

Nomad, the knight asks with marked hesitance, what are you doing? Push the button.

He waited, watching the readouts, his feet hooked under the chair to hold him to the seat. He tried to explain, but there wasn't enough air yet. So he waited. Excruciatingly he waited.

Nomad, I really think you should push the stupid button.

Outside the window, he could see the dark slope of the mountain moving faster and faster as their descent accelerated. That *was* air rushing outside.

Nomad. Please.

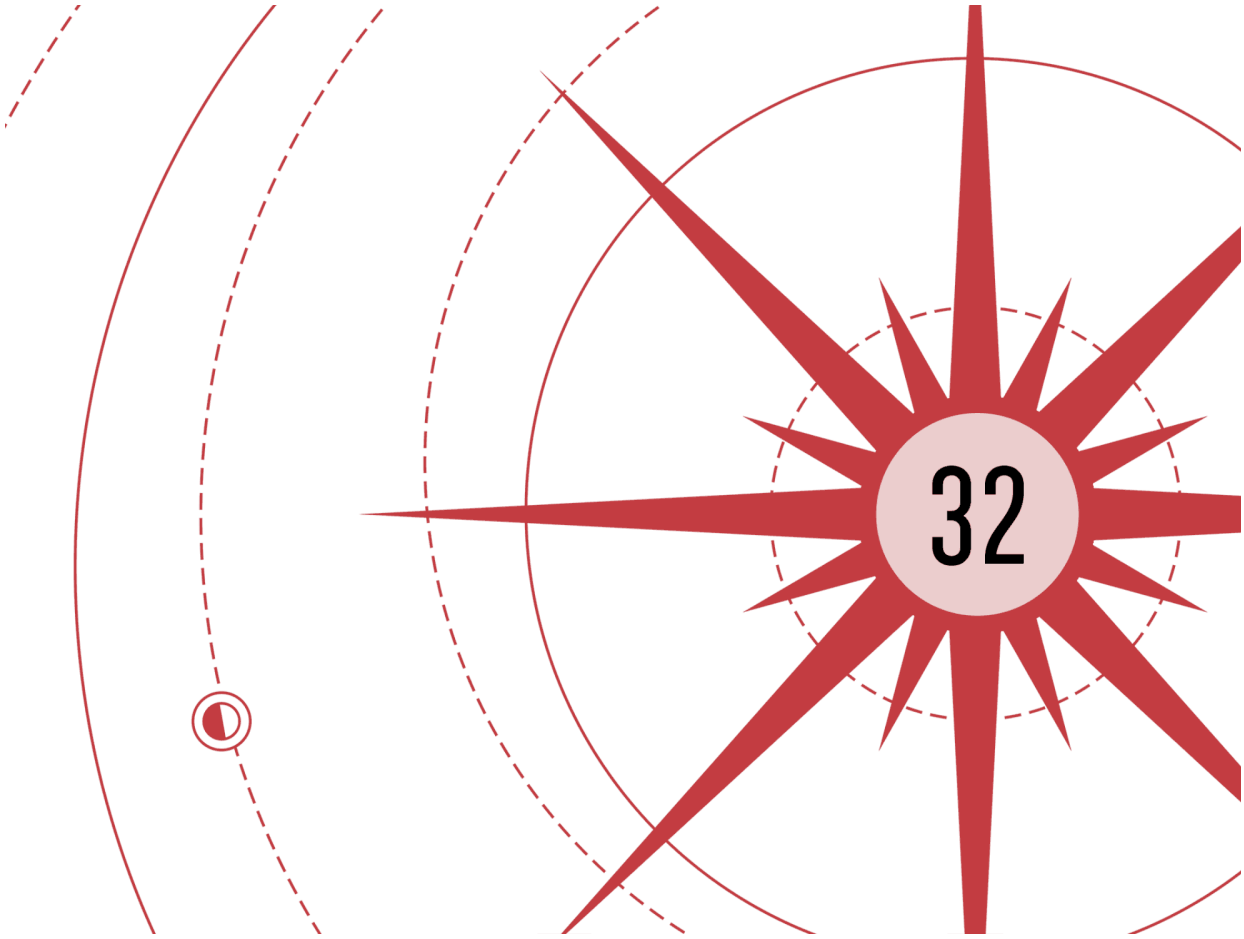
He took a deep breath of actual air—and spoke. "Not yet."

When?

He watched the indicators on the dials crawl from the red toward the orange for a few seconds. As soon as they hit the line, he slammed down on the button.

Four of the ten remaining engines fired up. With blasts that made his teeth rattle, they strained to slow the ship.

And then Beacon crashed into the ground.



HE SLAMMED THE emergency release button, which would unseal the doors of every room holding the people of Beacon. They could open the doors from the inside, but there was a good chance many of them were unconscious. It depended on how well the rooms had been sealed and how much the occupants had hyperventilated. One of the great ironies of life was that people running out of air often worried so much, they used it up faster.

That done, he checked Elegy—still alive. At least, the cinderheart was still glowing, and he thought she was breathing. No heartbeat, of course. No heart. He wasn't sure how that worked for her—there were different ways an Invested body made sure its cells were being sustained.

Time to see how much damage had been done to the ships. He stumbled to the door, but then immediately realized a danger he hadn't yet considered. He was standing on top of a containment unit housing extremely volatile, incorporeal Invested beings. Ghosts. Shades. Whatever one wanted to call them, they were among the most dangerous entities in the cosmere.

He'd just crashed their enclosure to the ground, then hit the door release button without a second thought. He hesitated on the threshold of his ship, wondering if he'd have time to get the vessel disengaged and flying on its own before they came for him, eyes red, hungry.

Fortunately he soon saw a few unsteady figures stumble out of the main hub ship just below. They didn't look like *they'd* been eaten. He descended, passing the majority who chose to quickly settle down on the deck. Inside, the ghost enclosure looked solid, not even cracked. Wisely they had built it out of their strongest stuff.

He checked to make sure all the other doors had opened, and found that two of the ten had leaked badly. The people inside had fared worse than the others, but there were no dead—just a few unconscious people, a lot of bumps, several broken limbs. At his suggestion, the Greater Good had been separated across three different ships, and all had survived the landing basically intact.

Rebeke emerged from a different ship, helping an older man Nomad didn't know. The man looked up at the stars, tears in his eyes, and began a quiet prayer of thanks. Noticing Nomad, Rebeke stepped over, clearly still dazed.

"It worked," she whispered. "I…I doubted you. I thought it wouldn't work. Why didn't I believe?"

"Because you're smart," Nomad replied. "It was a crazy plan."

"It was *your* plan."

"And I'm an expert on how risky my ideas get," he said. "I'm amazed we're both standing here right now."

The knight doesn't understand why Rebeke is glaring. After all, this is exactly the sort of stupid thing Nomad says all the time.

"Well," Rebeke finally said, "we're alive."

"Agreed," he said, looking over the gathering group of sore, partially suffocated, emotionally battered people. "For now. Let's go find the engineers. We're going to want to find out how badly I've wrecked your city."

"YOU WANT TO KNOW how bad it is?" Solemnity Divine asked. "I'd offer that we're somewhere between 'Oh, shades, what a mess' and 'I didn't even know that part could come off!'"

They stood inside the hall surrounding the Chorus's mist-filled enclosure that had blessedly remained intact. The usual team. Jeffrey Jeffrey, Zeal, Rebeke, and the Greater Good. Compassion sat on the ground, wrapped in a blanket, while the others stood.

Having jettisoned the previous building they'd used for meetings, they had picked this one for some insane reason. Perhaps it was seen as official or something. Or maybe it had just been the first of the chambers to be evacuated following the wreck.

"Lay it out straight, if it pleases you, Solemnity Divine," Confidence said. "How dire is our current situation?"

"Six engines locked up completely and will need a full injector replacement," she said. "Mud rammed into all the downward-facing jets. Smashed-up intakes on three junction points, and some of the clasping mounts were broken by the crash. I'd suggest we fly separately from here on out, as I can't guarantee the integrity of the whole."

"That's not…too bad," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "Is it?"

"Depends," Solemnity Divine said, spreading her hands wide. "My team can fix this. We *might* even be able to do it before the sun rises."

"We have extra time," Contemplation agreed. "Because of the mountains. Though we'll need a corridor of shadow from the sun to escape—so we can't hide here forever."

"Two and a half hours, maybe a little more," Zeal said. "That's what the navigators told me. Any longer than that, and we'd have to cross a field of fire to get back into the dusk."

Two and a half of their hours. Those mountains were extremely tall for the size of the planet, giving quite a shadow to shelter Beacon. Particularly with the slow rotation of the planet, he could understand where that much time came from.

It was still a frighteningly small amount of time to solve their problems.

"I already have the Chorus fabricating parts," Solemnity Divine said. Indeed, sounds came softly from the center of the enclosure. More unnervingly though, Nomad was *sure* he heard someone whisper an echo to her words each time she spoke. "And in the time remaining, I might be able to get the ships into flying shape. Except they won't move, even once they're repaired."

"Sunhearts," Nomad guessed. "We're out of power."

"The engines burned hotter—but less efficiently—than we'd hoped," she said, nodding in agreement. "We've got almost nothing left. It's a miracle we

landed—only four of the engines fired, and with many that didn't, it was because their sunhearts were depleted."

"So," Compassion said from her seated position, "we're stopped. Frozen."

The word seemed to carry more weight for them, burdened with context that Nomad could guess at. This was a world where being frozen, being stopped, was death.

"We're going to have to steal some souls," Zeal said with a firm nod. "If it pleases all, I shall gather my team. Do we have enough power to fly one ship on a raid, then back?"

"Yes," Solemnity Divine said. "But…who are you going to raid?"

"You can't go south, Zeal," Jeffrey Jeffrey said. "Not unless we want to try to cross even *more* highlands."

"North is the Cinder King," Rebeke said softly, from where she stood just outside their circle. As if she weren't sure she was wanted or not.

"He's got plenty of sunhearts to spare," Nomad said, "after feeding your captive friends to the sun. Won't those be coming up soon? The sunhearts that were made the first time I stood in the sunlight?"

"First time?" Rebeke asked.

Nomad nodded upward with his chin. "Up there, the sunlight struck me on the deck of Beacon, but didn't do anything. I'm still trying to figure out why…"

They all regarded him with reverence.

"It wasn't me being Sunlit," he said. "The ship didn't melt either."

That didn't help their looks of amazement. As if they thought he had protected the entire ship—as if he had the power to shield them all from the sunlight somehow.

You know, the knight says with a wry sense of amusement, you always complain about the legends you start. Then you say things like this…

"Regardless," Nomad said, forging forward, "the Cinder King created a whole big group of new sunhearts yesterday—and the spot where he did should be just ahead of us."

"The souls of our friends, left in the sunlight," Zeal said with a solemn nod. "We know the longitude. If we use the prospector, we could find them."

"The Cinder King always guards the border between the great maelstrom and the shadow," Confidence said. "He doesn't want anyone else to claim the sunhearts there."

"Explain this to me again," Nomad said, frowning, trying to form a mental image. "The day side of the planet is incinerating heat and melted rock. I

understand that. But there's also a…storm you call the great maelstrom? Is this storm more violent than the one we flew through in the darkness?"

"Yes," Compassion whispered. "The great maelstrom follows the sunset, when the planet first passes into night. It's a raging tempest of incredible violence. When the land finally cools and the storm dissipates, the shadow begins—the cloud cover we hide in. That line is where sunhearts are collected."

"We raid him right there, then," Nomad said. "Attack at the collection point and steal some. How far away is that?"

"For a fast ship?" Zeal said. "It can be as little as an hour's flight from near-dawn to the great maelstrom."

Again Nomad was struck by the tiny size of this planet. Around two hundred miles at most in diameter, by his quick calculations. Amazing.

"So there's a chance," he said. "We have two and a half hours. We fly in, we steal sunhearts, we get back here."

"It won't work," Confidence said, folding her bony arms. "We raided him just recently. He's not going to be taken unaware again."

"Perchance," Zeal said. "But if I may offer a counterargument, he can't have expected us to survive that ascent, right? So far as he presumes, we were destroyed and he is the victor. Perhaps we can steal a Union scout ship, so that nobody realizes it's us, and get in close enough to steal some sunhearts right out of his vessels."

"Steal one of their ships?" Contemplation said. "In time? Yes, your words have merit, and he might assume we are dead. But I cannot imagine stealing a ship and executing such a plan in the span we have. I agree with Confidence, Zeal. We had weeks to plan the previous raid and were blessed by your device that could freeze his Charred."

"I can do it," Zeal promised. "Please. Let me try to save our people."

"Or," Nomad said, "we could try something else." He thumbed upward. "That's Elegy's *Dawnchaser*, right? A reinforced prospector?"

"And?" Contemplation said.

"And, as you've explained, the Cinder King always collects his sunhearts *after* the maelstrom has passed. What if we didn't wait? What if we were to fly ahead of him and steal them right out of the ground before he gets to them? Inside the storm?"

Collectively they gaped at him.

All right, the knight says, that's fun. I like the way you make their brains melt. It's cute.

Confidence sputtered. “Survive the great maelstrom? It’s impossible.”

“Nobody goes *into* the maelstrom,” Contemplation said. “It’s madness.”

“Same is said of the storm on my homeworld,” Nomad said. “But I know someone who survived it, then inspired a whole host of us to do the same.” He pointed at Elegy’s ship again. “You told me that was reinforced for flying into the maelstrom.”

“It never managed to go fully into the storm!” Solemnity Divine said. “I helped reinforce it, but the sensors always told her she’d die. She always backed down.”

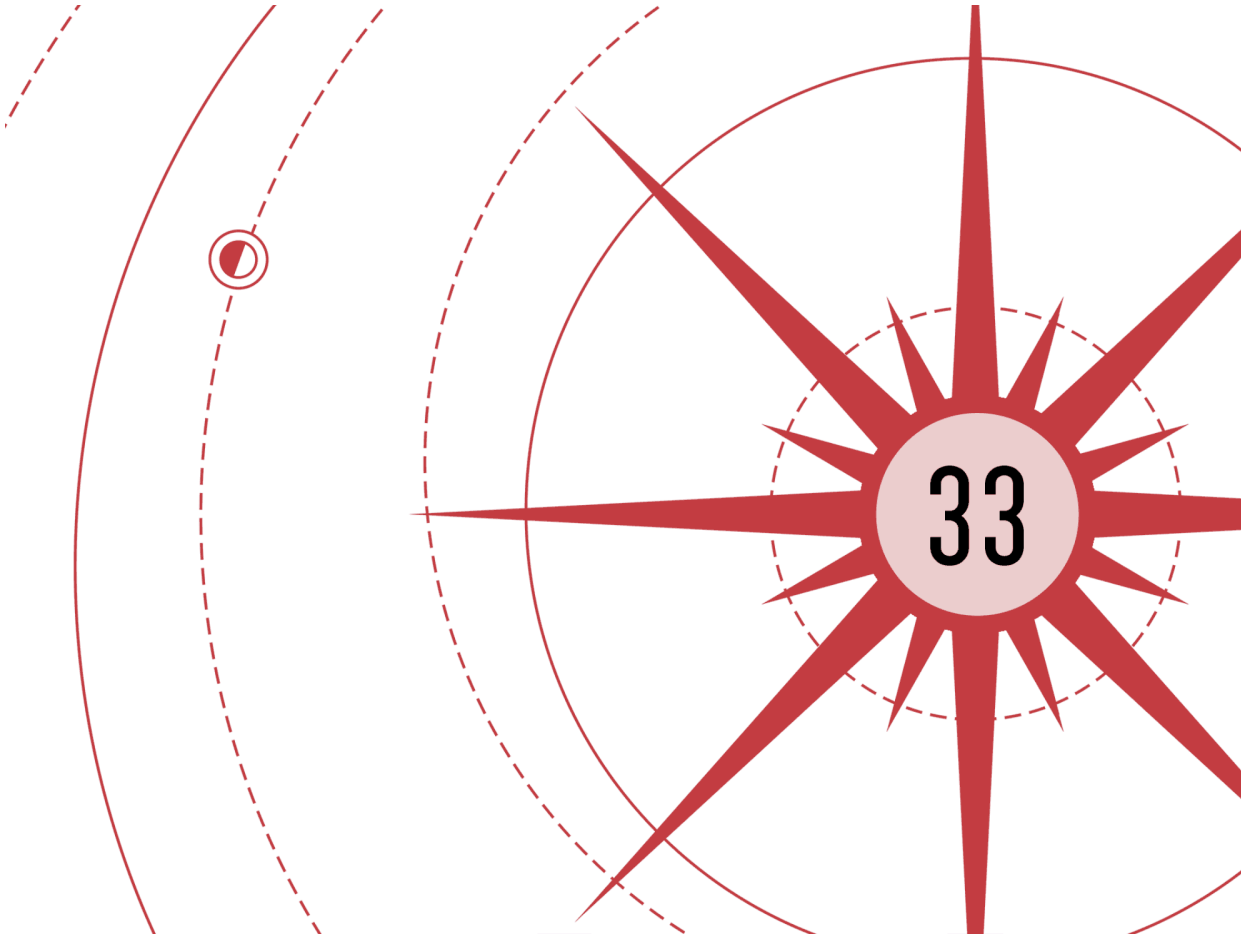
“She never actually flew into the great maelstrom?” Nomad asked.

“No,” Rebeke said. “Because she’s not *insane*.”

Nomad gestured to the sides, indicating the entire ship below them. One that had just climbed a mountain. “It’s a day for insanity, folks. A day for risks.”

They were all silent.

“I’m in,” Zeal said. “Let’s do it, Sunlit. Let’s steal from the sun itself.”



THEY WERE OFF in under ten minutes—the amount of time it took to unlock Elegy's ship and gather Zeal's team. The four people were more rough-and-tumble than the rest of the Beaconites he'd met—with thick work gloves, overalls of coarse cloth, and long coats. When they spoke, there was less sugar in their language and a lot more spice.

He'd begun to think of these people as monolithic, but that was never true. Even two siblings would reflect their culture and upbringing in different ways.

Nomad tasked Rebeke with the actual flying, and they lifted off, skimming the muddy ground, leaving Beacon—what was left of it—huddled in the mountain's shadow, helpless before the advancing sun. Nomad wished the *Dawnchaser* were more dynamic—and a little less like some kind of bulbous insect.

"So let me get this straight," said one of Zeal's team—a beefy guy swathed in so much leather that Nomad wondered if he'd depopulated an

entire corridor of beasts to make the outfit. “We are flying *into* the blessed maelstrom itself.”

“Indeed,” Zeal said, standing on one of the seats by the wall, leaning back, arms folded.

“*Then*,” the guy continued, “we are going to get *out of the ship*—still in the great maelstrom, mind you—and find the blessed sunhearts?”

“Yup,” Zeal said. “Well, *you’ll* be getting out of the ship to harvest them, Hardy. I’ll be running operations from the comfort of the cab, probably munching on some tea cakes. Oh, and we dumped all our harvesting machinery, so you’ll have to dig them out by hand.”

The group chuckled. From what Nomad had gathered, this was how they ran operations—Zeal organized and maintained the team, but he relied on the others to do most of the fieldwork.

“You blessed fool,” Hardy said. “We’re all a group of *blessed* fools.”

Wait, the knight says. Is that fellow using the word “blessed” as…as a curse?

“It’s a conservative religious society,” Nomad said in Alethi. “You use the tools you’re given.” Then, before any of the others could interject, he spoke in their language. “*I’ll* be going out into the storm, not any of you. We brought you because Zeal insisted that I have you here for backup.”

All four stared at him, then they nodded as one.

“Well, that’s good enough for me, then,” Hardy said, settling back. “Wake me when we get there.”

“You’ll know,” Zeal said with a grin. “Oh, you’ll know.” He looked to Nomad. “We’re behind you, Sunlit. It’s enough for me that you think this will work.”

“I appreciate it,” Nomad said with a nod.

In the corner, Elegy began to stir, finally. They’d brought her because, as before, there was really no other place to put her. He supposed they could have locked her to a random part of Beacon’s deck, but in the frenzy of motion getting ready to leave, he honestly hadn’t thought about that.

She blinked awake, then pulled back against the corner, glaring with primal confusion at the assembled group. Until her eyes settled on Nomad. Recognizing him, she seemed to relax.

He turned and climbed into the cab with Rebeke, wanting to keep his eyes forward. Always running. Always watching for the next chasm to jump.

Are you worried, the hero muses, about how much those people back there trust you?

"Not if it helps us all keep moving," Nomad said.

Would they tell you, though, if this were a terrible idea?

"They did tell me."

And went along with it anyway.

"Because it's going to work," Nomad said. He settled into the copilot's seat next to Rebeke. On the dash next to her was a small glowing fragment of sunheart. It didn't have much of a charge, but he was still surprised to see it. He thought they'd gathered all those up and bundled them together for this ship to use as a power source.

"Thank you," she said to him, "for letting me come along. The others always treat me as some kind of…memento or figurehead or…"

"Mascot," Nomad said.

"I don't know that word."

"Kind of like a good-luck charm."

"Because they followed my sister, their great Lodestar, and to a lesser extent my brother," she said. Her voice caught a little when she mentioned him. "They don't follow me, though."

"You're young," Nomad said. "People underestimate the young."

"Can you…" She took a deep breath, steeling herself, gloved hands on the controls. "Can you teach me to be a killer?"

"I'm not so good at it myself these days."

"What do you mean?" she said. "I've seen you resist. I know you're a killer."

He smiled. If she thought this shell of what he'd once been was a killer… "I don't have time to teach you, Rebeke. Give me a few weeks and maybe I could train you in some combat skills. But that's merely learning to fight. Learning to kill…it's something else."

"They're different?"

"One requires skill. The other…"

"No conscience?" she asked softly.

"It's the existence of a conscience that makes it difficult. Combat training is about preparing you to act *regardless* of conscience—usually via repetition. We make it so that your body knows what to do before you actively consider what it will mean. Or what it will cost you."

"That sounds horrible," she whispered.

"You're the one who asked."

She gripped the control wheel tighter, eyes forward—though the landscape had grown dark. They'd entered the shadow of cloud cover, and

rain sprayed the windshield.

"You don't need to be a killer," he said, "to get people to respect you, Rebeke."

"Then how?"

"Keep following your gut. Keep doing what needs to be done. You'll get there."

"When?"

"Can't say," he replied. "But don't be so eager. There are burdens to being in charge that you're not considering. I guarantee it."

She glanced at him. "Is that what happened to you?"

"Let's just say that leadership didn't agree with me."

That's not true, Nomad. You were a good leader.

"Aux, 'good' isn't enough. Life, like measurements in science, often depends entirely on your frame of reference." Then, to keep Rebeke from brooding, he reverted to her language. "I think Elegy is getting better."

"She remembered something?" Rebeke said, eager.

"No," he said. "But earlier she didn't seem quite so feral, quite so eager to kill everyone around her. We had a conversation before we went up the mountain. I think it might have gotten through to her."

"Thank you," Rebeke said, "for caring about her."

"I have empathy for abandoned soldiers," Nomad said. "Being one myself." He nodded toward the sliver of sunheart—just a fragment, smaller than a person's pinkie finger. "What's that?"

She glanced at it. "Mother's soul," she said softly. "The main core was drained almost entirely in the escape. Solemnity Divine cut me off this small piece, as she thought I might want to keep it close on this mission."

"Do you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm starting to wonder if I fixate too much on the dead and not enough on living."

Strange words, the knight notes, for a woman who lives in a society that is powered by the dead.

Nomad picked it up off the dash. He still needed a way to tweak his own soul, to make it so he could fight—actually fight—if he needed to. "Mind if I take it, then?"

"Go ahead," she replied. "I thought that if I kept her sunheart close, I'd feel her. But I never have."

He mused on that, turning the sliver of sunheart over in his fingers. Then he sat back, closing his eyes. "I'm an idiot," he muttered.

Now, now, the knight says. You're not an idiot, Nomad. An idiot is someone without knowledge or ability. You're something else: a person with knowledge or ability who misuses it. That makes you a fool instead.

"And you got those definitions from…"

Wit, naturally.

"Of course."

So what are you being a fool about?

"These sunhearts," he said, tapping the sliver with his fingernail, "worked on Elegy because everyone on this planet is Connected. I'm not sure how or why, but their souls see one another as the same. They can share heat with one another. It's become deeply embedded in their culture. But they couldn't do it with me, even when I wanted to. So…"

So this sunheart can't draw strength from your soul, because it's from this planet, and you aren't.

"Exactly. Linguistic Connection isn't enough. I'd need something more to be able to draw upon this." He could feed off their power, like he could almost all forms of Investiture. But the sunhearts refused to let him put anything back in, to lance his soul, because they didn't accept him as one of them.

It's useless to you, then?

"I could maybe hack it with some rare devices," he said. "Which I don't have access to here." With a sigh, he heaved himself from the seat.

He had been so very close to escaping the Torment in some small way. Realizing it was impossible felt like hitting a wall.

He wanted to be moving. Physically, not just in a vehicle. He entered the back room, but there wasn't a lot of space here for pacing. Zeal and his team —except Hardy, who was napping by the wall—had huddled together and were munching on some rations, laughing.

How do they take such joy? the knight wonders. They're right on the edge of destruction.

"They've always lived on the edge of destruction," Nomad replied. "I suppose they learned to find happiness in the moments between disasters."

Then…what's wrong with you? Why can't you do that?

Auxiliary asked it without malicious intent; Nomad knew him well enough to tell that, even without vocal inflections. It still felt like a dagger to the gut.

He closed his eyes to the laughing people and settled down on a bench near the wall.

“They know me too,” Elegy whispered.

He glanced to where she sat, chained. He knew some women caretakers had helped her with physical needs earlier, but he felt a stab of shame for the raw skin at the sides of the manacles and the way her outfit—that long open-fronted robe and trousers—hadn’t been changed since they’d pulled her out of the mud.

She was focused on Zeal and his team, her eyes…confused? Her expressions were tough to read.

“They keep looking at me,” she continued, “as if expecting to see a spark of familiarity. Like…I don’t know. I used to have words to describe such things. I no longer do.”

“They did know you,” he said. “Everyone in Beacon did.”

“I don’t remember them, yet they all remember me,” she said. “Yes…they *remember* me, but they don’t *know* me. Not anymore.”

“There are some,” he said, “who would find that liberating. You’re completely free from who you used to be, Elegy. You can make of yourself whatever you want. There are many who would like to abandon the burdens of their pasts.”

“You?”

“No. Not me.” He looked up at the ceiling, wishing he could see the stars. “I don’t particularly *like* who I am, but I cherish what I’ve learned about myself. It lets me trust in certain truths.”

“I don’t know what to trust or believe,” she said. “The voice in my head was so confident…”

“Do you think *it* knew you?” he asked. “Who will you follow, Elegy? The person who demands you kill? Or the person you used to be?”

“I don’t know that person.”

He nodded toward the others. “That person you used to be, she inspired all of this. Everything these people have done to be free? That was her, the old Elegy.” He shrugged. “You can’t be her, but you *can* trust that she knew what she was doing. By the ideals and community she helped create.”

She slunk down, lowering her eyes. “The voice,” she said, “might come back. I feel it building, whispering at the edges of my mind. It might corrupt my heart again.”

“Then use this,” he said, taking out the sliver of sunheart Rebeke had given him. He pressed it into her chained fingers. “Keep that. If the voice returns, speak the words: ‘Bold one on the threshold of death, give this sunheart my heat that it may bless those who still live.’”

She repeated the words softly. “Why those words?”

“It will siphon off a smidge of your soul and put it into the sunheart. Not enough to power the thing, unfortunately, but your soul will naturally abandon the pieces that are less…less you, I guess. Either way, it should help keep you sane. That’s how I helped make you become more aware.”

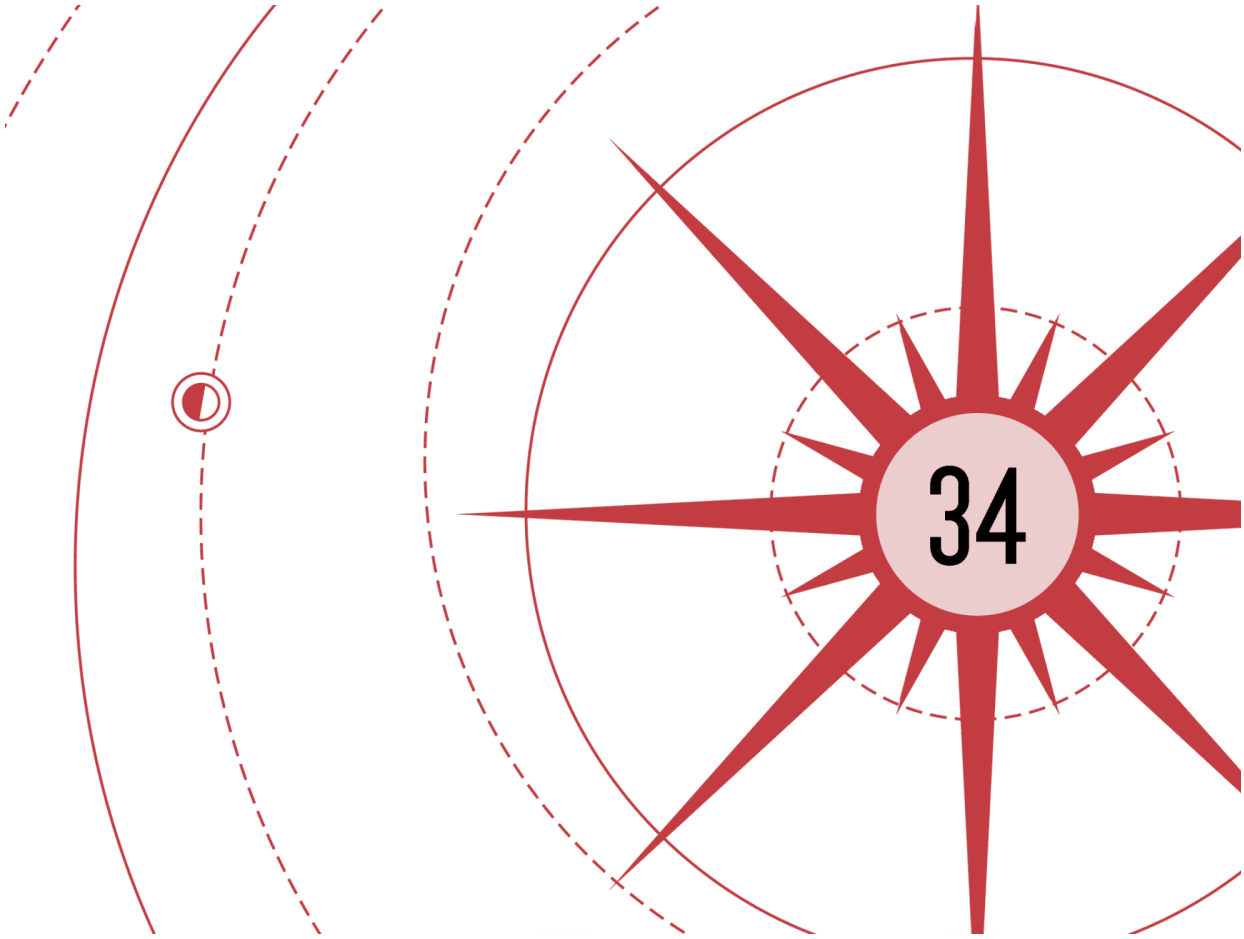
He nodded at her encouragingly, then unlocked one of the manacles. She looked at him hungrily, a certain savagery still lurking within. He smiled at her, but pointedly left the other manacle on. One hand free was the most he was comfortable giving her right now.

He left her studying that sliver of her mother’s soul. Hopefully he hadn’t somehow just handed her the power she needed to energize herself and break free in order to destroy him. Storms, he thought he’d gotten past trusting people who were that dangerous.

He walked away with a sense of dread. But—as he’d grown proficient at doing—he ignored it for now. Instead he returned to the cab because he heard thunder.

He arrived just in time to see the great maelstrom through the windshield as it broke the darkness ahead.

It was on fire.



THE SUDDEN BRIGHTNESS made him blink, his eyes watering. He kept forgetting that the Beaconites kept their lights uncommonly low, even indoors.

At first, the landscape ahead looked like a mess of undulating oranges and yellows—an abstract painting, like the Nalthians loved. Slowly, as his eyes adjusted, he made out the nuances. Most of the burning portions were below, but swirling whirlwinds of flame rose from the ground in churning, fiery vortexes. The light glowed primarily from the center of these cyclones, but where each hit the clouds, bright bursts set the very sky afire.

"It's on fire?" Nomad said. "*Why* is it on *fire*?"

"It's the great maelstrom beyond sunset!" Zeal said, crowding up into the cabin beside him. "You said you'd been in one before."

"Storms shouldn't be on fire!" Nomad exclaimed. "They're wet! Full of wind and rain."

“You suggested this plan,” Rebeke said, frowning, “and you didn’t know it would be on fire?”

He gaped at the inferno. They were still on the dark side of the planet, in night, but dangerously close to the day—now just on this side of sunset. Maybe that should have told him what he’d find, but storms. He’d heard tens of different descriptions of hell from tens of different cultures and lores. His own planet’s Damnation was a cold place, but so many others talked of eternal fire. A place where flames lashed the soul and heat melted the very fat under the flesh.

He’d never thought he’d look upon such a place. The ship turned and curved along the perimeter, flying at a slight angle to trail the storm—which retreated before them, chasing the setting sun. At least, at ground level, there didn’t seem to be many open magma vents. Indeed, he noticed something. The ground grew cool with unusual speed. Almost like…

“Something is drawing the heat away,” he whispered. “Like your bodies can draw it from one another…”

They gave him blank stares, but this seemed a likely explanation. Something about the core of the planet *was* odd. It created far more gravity than it should have for its size—so either it was incredibly dense or incredibly Invested. He suspected the latter. And now that core was drawing out that heat, cooling the ground.

That unnaturally fast cooling cracked and shattered the landscape. Releasing…

“Gases,” he guessed. “Flammable gases, as a by-product of the sun blasting the landscape. But how… Normally methane is released by decomposition, which *certainly* isn’t happening here…”

“We’re getting close to the border of the corridor,” Rebeke said, tapping a few dials that were tracking their progress. “We made good time. Beacon has maybe an hour and forty-five minutes until sunlight reaches it.”

Nomad nodded, checking the time.

“We’ll soon encounter the Cinder King’s scouts,” she continued, “unless we duck into the storm. You sure you want to do that?”

“Can this ship handle it?” he asked as a cyclone of fire sprang up beside them—a whirlwind of smoke and ash snaking down from above, then bursting aflame.

“Maybe?” Zeal said. “It has as much insulation as we could stuff in it, and some cooling mechanisms as well. That, plus the armor…well, maybe?”

“The clock is ticking,” Nomad said, and Zeal nodded. The clock, for Nomad, was always ticking. “Take us in.”

Rebeke flicked a switch—bringing up the thick blast shield to protect the windshield. She flew them in via instruments, something Nomad had never been good at doing. He much preferred flying with his hair in the wind, throttle in his fingers.

He’d foolishly anticipated a storm like at home. A darkness thick with chaos, occasionally sliced by lightning. He’d anticipated rain—which always reminded him of Roshar in the best ways. There was something comforting about the sound of water on metal or stone; it had a primal, rhythmic quality. The sound of a world’s heartbeat, racing fast with excitement.

His friends from back then had loved the wind, and he couldn’t blame them. But for Nomad, the *rain* had become his favorite manifestation of a storm. He loved stepping out in it, feeling it wash him clean.

He’d assumed, if it was raining, he could survive any storm. But here he experienced something different. The ship was buffeted and tossed, but without that comforting sound of water on the roof. This maelstrom was wrong. Like a breakdown with no tears, where you curled in the corner and struggled to contain your emotions, but somehow—despite the pain filling you to bursting—couldn’t get any of it to come out.

Dials on the dash went wild. Zeal pointed out two heat gauges—one indicating the temperature of the hull and a smaller one indicating the temperature inside of the ship. Both were rising steadily.

“We’re going to need to be quick,” Rebeke said.

“I wish we could see out there,” Nomad replied, leaning low as a whirlwind shook the ship. “We could dodge the firespouts.”

“Instruments are better,” Rebeke said. “I’m cutting us right into the Cinder King’s corridor—and the line he always makes Union follow. I’ll get us to the proper longitude, then we can use the prospector to search the region until we find something. Hopefully we can do all that before we cook ourselves.”

Nomad nodded, finding the sudden scents of scorched stone and ashen brimstone overpowering. Along with Zeal and the rest of his crew, though, he could only stand there, anxiously watching the dials rise as Rebeke flew them farther and farther into the terrible firestorm.

“Into hell itself,” he whispered.

“Hell is a forest,” Zeal mumbled back. “Full of quiet trees and unquiet dead.”

By the time Rebeke reached the proper location, the chamber was hot enough that even Nomad started to feel uncomfortable. The others must have found it torturous. Still, none of them complained. Rebeke swung low, using radar to judge the landscape and keep them from crashing. She skimmed the newborn ground with the prospecting gear—like a metal detector on the bottom of the ship, designed to find Investiture—hunting for sunhearts hidden in the earth.

At least in this case, she could avoid the worst of the cracked portions of the ground—as manifested on the radar screen. That might let them avoid the worst of the gas emissions. What if those were toxic? Nomad, with an abundance of caution, stopped breathing—but the others wouldn't have that luxury.

There, Auxiliary said. *A ping just came from the prospector controls.*

"Go back," Nomad said, trusting in Auxiliary. Even though he used Nomad's ears, he used them better. "Rebeke? Turn back. I heard something."

She glanced at him, face pouring with sweat, then nodded. Nomad glanced at the heat dials. All well into the red. Storms. She'd probably been retreating as fast as she could toward the cooler air of the shadow. Mission, in the sudden suffocating heat, forgotten.

Still, she swerved the ship back.

As they hovered over a certain spot, the faintest of pings came from the dash—nearly inaudible over the sounds of the tempest outside and the groaning of the ship's hull.

"Shades," Zeal said. "How did you hear that?"

Nomad ignored him, rushing to the door. "I'm going out. Stay close." He steeled himself, then opened the door and slipped out, slamming it shut behind him.

The sudden light of the burning sky blinded him. Fortunately no spiraling infernos were directly nearby, but his skin—despite his body's protections—immediately started to burn. And it *hurt*. Damnation!

Auxiliary forming as a spade in his hand, Nomad leaped free of the deck and toward the ground below. He hit hard, falling to his knees in what appeared to be loamy earth—but his eyes just saw a vague brownness as the heat dried them out. He glanced upward as a gust of flaming wind blew across him. He managed to blink his eyes once, and the ship was gone.

What had happened to the ship? Had it landed? Flown away? Swept farther into the storm? He couldn't tell, because right then, everything went black—his eyes failing.

Storms, Nomad. This heat is using up your strength with extreme speed. We're dropping Investiture at a frantic rate. Below five percent Skip capacity already.

Nomad grunted and started digging, pushing through the pain—which proved easier once it started to fade. That was a bad sign. It meant his skin had been burned deeply enough that the nerves were giving out. His body would draw upon its stored Investiture to stay alive—but in the face of the terrible damage being done, it focused on preserving his core systems and had given up on less essential things like nerve endings and sight.

I think, the hero says softly, this was a really, really bad idea.

Still, the ground seemed cooler than the air. Nomad gave up hunting for the sunhearts, deciding he just needed to get down and protect himself. He felt his skin flaking off, his hair burning away again.

He got down as low as he could manage, then formed Auxiliary as a large shield and positioned it between him and the sky. It was hard to tell without nerves, but he hoped that the damage to his body had been stopped. Hoped that he was no longer being actively burned to death. As long as his core organs and brain were able to keep going…

Under three percent Skip capacity.

Nomad sent a sense of quietude to Auxiliary, an indication to leave it be. He didn't need reports. Either he would live or he wouldn't.

The wind grew stronger, and he felt dirt and soil hitting his shield from above. His mind grew fuzzy, his thoughts rambling. The endless fatigue of never sleeping, of running just in front of his problems—which prowled behind him, always on the hunt and smelling blood. Exhaustion threatened to send him into a thoughtless abyss that—in his current state—might be the end.

He fought it by forcing himself to analyze the land around him. He focused, thinking, not letting himself fade away. As always, that questioning brain—that mind that had driven him to always ask, that cursed part of him that had led him to become Hoid's apprentice in the first place—wondered.

The ground *was* drawing in the heat. He was sure of it, as with the last flutters of his nerves, he could feel…*something* trying to draw his Investiture away into the depths of the planet. It couldn't claim his, but it tried.

The core of the planet fed on Investiture like he did. Was that a clue to how all of this worked? It helped explain how the dark side of the planet could exist. The weather patterns he'd expected to consume everything were

somehow quieted and stilled by this rapid cooling, creating a barrier between the dark side and the light…maybe?

But why was the sunlight so hot, and yet he'd been able to step into it on the deck of Beacon?

Was…was Nomad what they thought he was?

Storms? Was he…somehow…

No. He was no mythological hero. He'd failed these people by bullishly going forward with this plan to enter the maelstrom. The signs had been there. Auxiliary's hesitance, the others' overeager deference to his ideas. He'd already done something they'd considered impossible in cresting the mountains. But there, he'd taken the time to get the facts, the science, the data. He'd tested their engines; he'd flown a scouting mission; he'd used the knowledge of the engineers.

That plan had been hasty, but double-checked and based on a solid scientific foundation. This time, he'd picked a direction, spouted off an idea, and started running.

That had been his problem for a while. He was the man who ran. Now entombed in rock, with no way to run from himself, he confronted it. He had failed. Experience, in this case, had served him poorly.

He'd learned from wise battle commanders that in times of tension, someone making *any* decision was often better than standing around. But there was a caveat to that lesson. Pithy though it sounded, the leaders who said it were the ones who had lived long enough to pass it on. They were the ones, in the heated moments, who didn't just make decisions. They made the *right* decisions.

Their advice was good, assuming you were the type of person who judged wisely in tense situations. He did *sometimes*. This time, he'd jumped in too quickly. And he'd led the Beaconites to destruction.

He tried to feel shame at that. He really did. Instead he simply felt… numb. As if…as if he'd known this was coming, and a part of him had accepted long ago that his failures would finally catch up to him.

Pain started to prickle across his arms and legs. He was so low on Investiture, it took longer than normal to heal. Fortunately these were the easy kind of wounds to survive with his particular talents. Terrible burns didn't directly impact his core organs or his skeletal structure. The body knew what to do, and his warped soul—for all he hated the part that prevented him from defending himself—fed on Investiture to restore him, bit by bit.

His master, who had held the Dawnshard far longer, could never die. Nomad was far from that level. But today, despite excruciating pain, his body healed the burns. And as the pain receded—and he blinked restored eyes in the darkness—he realized he could hear the rain.

Honor Almighty. He could hear the rain.

"Aux?" he managed to say. "Time?"

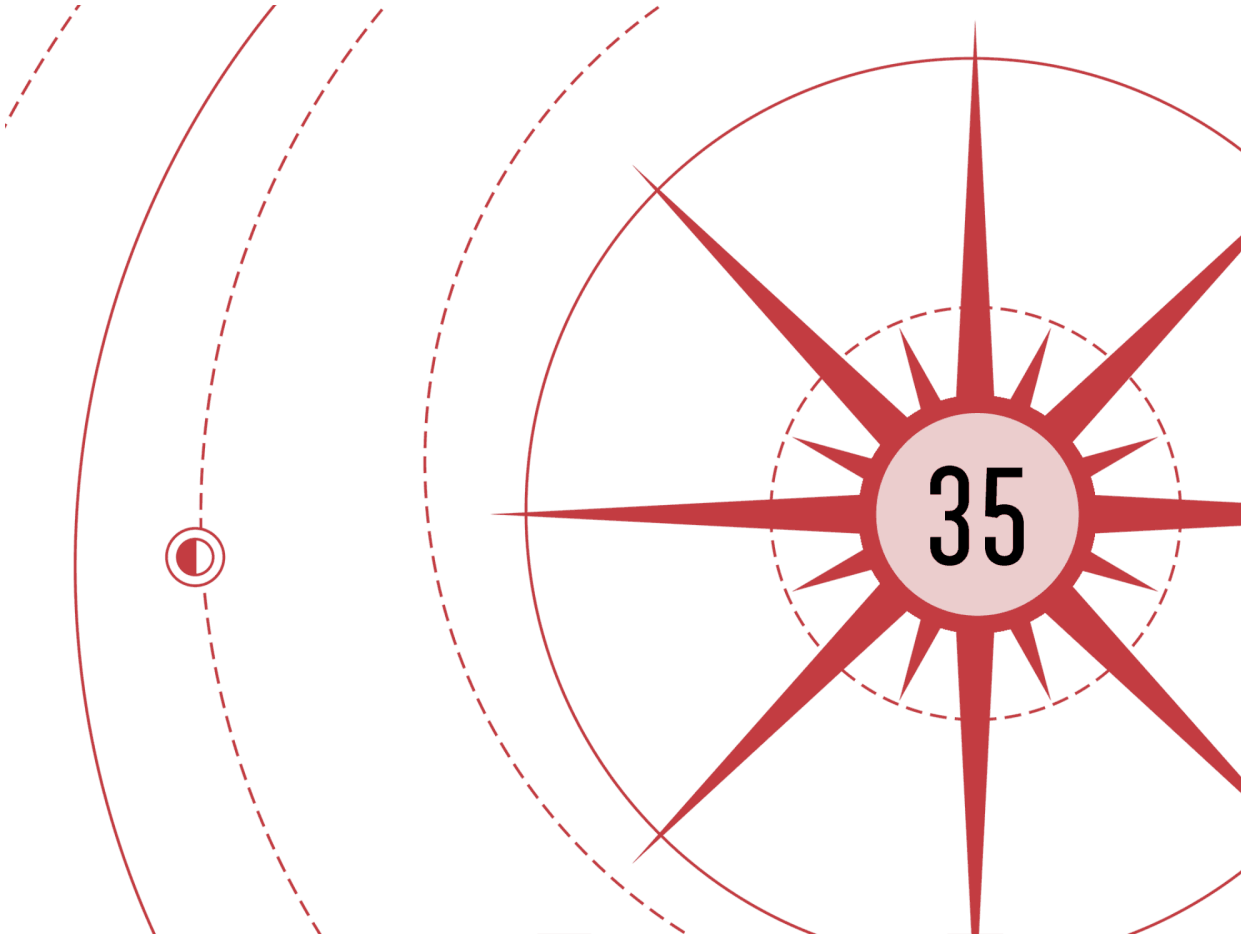
You've been buried for around fifteen minutes. There is just under an hour and a half until Beacon falls. Nomad…you have essentially no Investiture left. Maybe I can use the dregs to transform, but you have no more healing, no enhancements.

Yes, but he was back in the shadow. The planet had rotated. And the Cinder King's forces would soon arrive to harvest their sunhearts. They would bring ships he could steal. They would find the power sources, and he could take them.

He could still save Beacon. Assuming he could get back to them before the sunrise.

The race was not finished. He wasn't done running yet.

Nomad shifted, heaving upward on the shield, and broke out of the earth —healed, naked, determined.



HIS FIRST GOAL was to find a hiding place. A nearby stone arch, lit by occasional flashes of lightning from above, provided that. A place he could tuck himself away and listen to the rain whisper. He couldn't spare much time. They'd arrived in forty-five minutes, flying Elegy's relatively slow ship. He needed to be fast to return.

Unfortunately all he could do was wait.

It was the most excruciating of activities. The opposite of his personal mandate. Even when he was going backward, he was at least *moving*. But right now there was nothing else he could do, so he tried to let the rain comfort him. Envelop him. Others might hate or even fear it. But beneath its veil, he found his strength returning.

It only took two minutes. Lights appeared, bringing hope. The prospecting team who protected the Cinder King's riches. At least a dozen ships. They skimmed the area, then eventually settled down right where he'd dug himself

out. They didn't seem to notice his grave for what it was, and instead had a machine start digging into the soil.

So slow. Too slow. He watched, pained.

Ember-red light seeped from the ground, granting him an unexpected sight. Many of those present, watching the process, were Charred. Indeed, wasn't that the *Cinder King's* ship over there, landed in the mud? He was shocked to see the tyrant himself walk across the landscape, eschewing an umbrella as he approached the dig site.

Nomad doubted the king usually went on retrievals like this. He seemed wary—indeed, as his people dug out several sunhearts, the Cinder King watched the sky, looking about expectantly.

Why is he here, though? the knight asks. Why would he come out into the rain?

"He knows I'll try something," Nomad whispered. "He's expecting a fight."

How? How would he know?

Well, perhaps "know" was the wrong word. But the Cinder King obviously anticipated the worst. In this case, that meant making sure that Nomad—the wild card from another world—wasn't coming for these sunhearts.

The presence of this many troops—and the king himself—changed Nomad's plans. He couldn't fight; he still didn't know how to lance the boil on his soul. He might never figure it out. He was too much of an outsider for their local arcana to work on him.

So he needed a way to grab those sunhearts that didn't involve confrontation. A possible plan formed as a ship landed nearby, engine scorching the ground and throwing up hissing steam that made the air smell of dried mud. It was a ponderous vehicle with a large, vault-style door on the back. A worker opened it, then trotted over toward the dig, where a fourth and fifth sunheart had been laid out. Nomad couldn't grab those, but what if he waited for them to be handed to him?

Slinking through the darkness, he snuck up to the vault. Inside were several large cabinets bolted to the walls. He found room at the back to hide between them.

So…what are the chances this plan is stupid?

"Pretty good," Nomad admitted, but in this case, what planning or preparation could he do? Sometimes you really did just need to improvise, commit, and then hope. He did a cursory check of the drawers—empty. He

huddled down near the back, where he found an old sack with which to make a serviceable version of an Iriali wrap. Now somewhat clothed, he was able to form Auxiliary into a pretty good approximation of the front and top of one of the long cabinets—a prop, like a false front to a building used in films at Silverlight.

Holding this in front of himself created the illusion that he wasn't there. Anyone glancing toward the back would just see an extra-long cabinet. He hoped the extra row of drawers wouldn't be too suspicious in the darkness.

All right, the knight admits, I like this plan. It might actually work.

Nomad said nothing, waiting—again—and listening to the rain on the roof. Counting the seconds. He saw through the thin spaces in his false cabinet front when workers approached carrying bright sunhearts.

"Don't see why he's here looking over our shoulders," one of the workers hissed. "And with Charred too. Does he think we're suddenly going to start stealing from him?"

"Best not to question," another voice said. "Don't give him any reason to pay attention to you. We're going to run out of captives soon, now that Beacon is gone."

The lights vanished one by one as they were put into drawers. Storms. They'd better not try to open one of *his* drawers. They'd fill the ones at the front first, right?

That's what they did. Storing the sunhearts, then retreating—their voices suddenly cut off as a loud *thump* shook the chamber. Nomad stood up from his hiding place and dismissed Auxiliary. That thump had been the vault door closing. He rushed to the drawers, and though they were locked individually, a crowbar made quick work of that.

The sunhearts were inside. One per drawer. He collected all he could find—five in total. That would be enough for Beacon, wouldn't it? Feeling relieved, he tucked them into another sack, then went to the vault door.

Which was locked. He stared at it, feeling foolish.

Uh, I don't think a crowbar will help with that, Nomad.

"We might need something sharper," Nomad said, holding his hand to the side.

I…don't think I can do that.

"You did it before," he said. "When we were underneath the city. You severed the bolts."

You did that, Nomad. It's not my soul that is cankered, not my oaths that have been broken. You are the one who can't harm anyone. You are the one

who can't form a weapon meant only for killing.

This wouldn't be only for killing. He just needed to slice through the metal of this door. He tried to recreate the mental state he'd been in when he'd cut those latches. Surely this moment was equally urgent.

But he was tired. And uncertain of himself. Beyond that, he could feel the canker on his soul growing stronger. Pushing against it was as futile as trying to break down this vault door with his fists. He struggled for a few minutes, then leaned forward, eyes squeezed closed, forehead against the door.

What was he doing? If he escaped the vault with these sunhearts, then what? Did he really think he was going to be able to steal a ship without getting into a fight? And even if he did, could he find his way back to Beacon on his own? He'd only flown ships from the city, which had the proper authentication devices. If he stole a Union ship, he'd be as blind as they were.

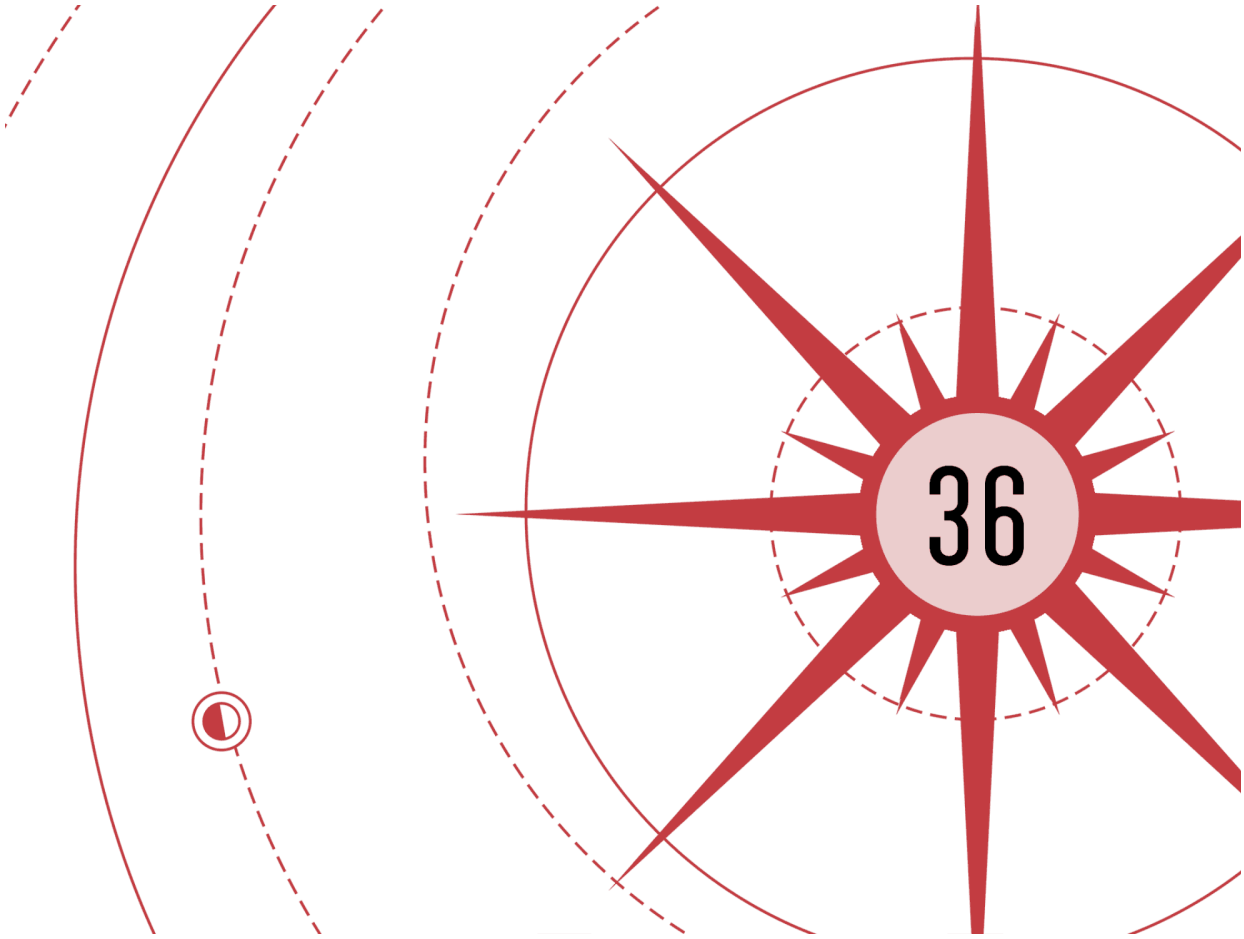
He…didn't know anymore. He was stuck. Not just in his running. He'd… he'd been stopped for some time. Stagnant. Always focused on the run, but never focused on the greater issues. The ones deep inside him.

He was frozen. His soul. His self. Running farther wasn't going to fix that. Regardless of what he told himself.

Click.

The vault door? For a moment, he thought his introspection had somehow influenced that. Then, with a panicked spike of alarm, he realized that someone was opening it from the outside. He scrambled back to restore his camouflage but was too late. The door swung open.

Revealing Zeal, standing alone in the mud.



ZEAL?

Zeal!

The small man was muddy up to his thighs, but he'd apparently survived the storm unscathed. He tucked away a set of lockpicks, glanced behind himself, started at a sound, then moved to climb into the vault.

It's Zeal, the knight says with unabating enthusiasm. Storms, I don't think I've ever been this happy to see someone breaking and entering.

"Zeal!" Nomad said, causing the man to stop in place, squint—then let out a huge sigh of relief.

"Sunlit?" he asked. "You blessed man. You *survived*?"

"I did," Nomad said, stepping forward with the sack of sunhearts. "Looks like you and I had the same plan."

Zeal peered into the sack, then up at Nomad with a grin on his face. "I…I can't believe you." He put a muddy hand to his head. "And here I thought *I* was saving the city. You had it all in hand, even after we abandoned you."

"I doubt you had a choice."

"We didn't, but—" He froze, hearing voices outside. He nodded to the side. "Maybe we catch up later? We've got about an hour left to save Beacon—which is going to be tight, with a forty-five-minute flight back at best, depending on the wind."

Nomad nodded, jumping out into the mud. An argument was going on in the near distance, where several of the Cinder King's officials were growing increasingly agitated. Apparently one thought that twelve people had been left here as tribute to the sun, while the other thought there had only been eleven.

Nomad followed Zeal out to the right, into the darkness. "Did you actually *steal* one of their scout ships?" he whispered.

"No," Zeal said. "Didn't have the wherewithal for that. I grabbed the controls after Rebeke collapsed from heat exhaustion; I barely got us back to the shadow before we all burned up. Rest of the team is out—either unconscious or throwing up all over the cab. Once we get back, I'd hold my breath if I were you.

"I was the only one still hale, though Rebeke seemed to be recovering faster than the others. Still…well, I decided there was only one option. I had to grab the sunhearts myself. With fresh ones for power, we can maybe push the ship faster going back. It's a hope, at least.

"So I landed and watched for lights in the darkness. I followed them while running dark, then snuck out and prayed to Adonalsium that I'd be able to manage on my own." He shook his head, the movement made barely visible by the rolling lightning in the clouds. "And there you were. Already in the vault. I doubted you, Sunlit. I'm sorry."

"No, Zeal," he said. "I—"

Nomad. Someone's following us.

He stopped in place, turning. Two burning eyes pierced the darkness behind them, illuminating the smiling face of a man walking at an even pace.

"Run, Zeal," Nomad said.

The other man gasped, then obeyed. Nomad stayed in place, meeting those eyes.

"Guards!" the Cinder King shouted. "Charred! They are here! Come, stop them!"

The shout was accompanied by thunder. But the man didn't seem too alarmed, despite his shout. He stepped forward, toward Nomad, and spoke in a calmer voice.

“I knew you’d come,” the man said. “Call it…*faith*. That the true killer could not be defeated so easily. You wouldn’t fall with a whimper in a city trapped on the slopes. You’re meant to die in battle, offworlder. In battle with me.”

Nomad stepped forward, as if to face off with the Cinder King right there. And he really wished he could. He’d stuff those burning eyes into the muddy water until they went out.

Instead he tried to keep the man talking, figure out his fatal flaw—something Nomad could use against him. Charred rushed by on both sides, chasing poor Zeal. Nomad kept his attention on their lord.

“You like being strong,” Nomad said. “You like having power over others.”

“All life,” the man said, “is *about* having power over others. Wealth? It’s about making others do the work you don’t want to do. Strength? It’s the ability to push back harder than those who would push you. Religion?” His smile deepened. “Do men from your world really become gods?”

“You are fixated on me,” Nomad said, stepping forward. “You need to know if you are stronger than I am. Why? You already killed an offworlder…” Nomad narrowed his eyes. “No, you lied, didn’t you? You found that other offworlder as a corpse. And you’ve wondered ever since, were they stronger than you?”

“Of course I am the stronger one,” the Cinder King said, putting his hands out to the sides. “I’m alive. I didn’t lie; I found your kin—sick, not dead—but I’m stronger. After all, they’re now ashes. I have the sunheart to prove it.”

Sunheart.

Damnation. Nomad really *was* an idiot.

He got close enough to the Cinder King that the other man slid a sword from the sheath at his side, grinning at the prospect of a duel.

Then Nomad started running.

Right past the man, who cried out and gave chase—but Nomad was faster. He dashed through the mud and lightning, rain spraying against his face, wind whipping at the makeshift garment he’d tied at his waist. He sped straight for the Cinder King’s ship, then leaped up to grab the cold metal lip of the deck. He pulled himself up and shoved into the cab of the ship, racing through it to the cabin filled with trophies.

“Face me!” the Cinder King shouted behind him. “I am giving you the honor of doing so!”

Ignoring him, Nomad smashed through the glass on the display case and seized the tiny sunheart on the shelf there. It was the size of a pebble and glowing very faintly.

When he'd first talked to the Cinder King in this room, he'd been shown the book carried by the person whose soul now lay in his hand. A person from Nomad's homeworld.

This soul…he shared a bond with it. Would that be enough? He whispered the words of the prayer in Alethi. "Bold soul past the threshold of death, take into you my heat, that I may bless those who still live. *Please.*"

He felt a sudden cooling in his palm. Heat being pulled from within him.

It's working? Auxiliary asked. *Storms, it's working.*

Nomad turned as the Cinder King stumbled into the doorway. He thought of punching the man, and his body started to lock up. The sunheart might be working as he'd hoped, but he wasn't ready yet. So Nomad gave the king a grin, then leaped back into the pilot's cab and smashed out the front windshield—recently replaced from his last escape. Fortunately for him, they had done a poor job of it.

"Fine!" the Cinder King shouted at him. "A coward, then? If my Charred kill you, that will still prove what needs to be proven. You hear me, offworlder?"

Nomad vaulted off the deck, then went scrambling through the mud back the way he had come. Lightning in the darkness showed him a worrisome sight—the ship, Elegy's ship, still in the mud in the distance. Zeal hadn't taken off yet, and Charred—tens of them—were climbing all over the thing.

Like most of the ships he'd seen here, this one was shaped kind of like an old naval boat—with a cab at back and a wide deck at the front. Railings rimmed the entire thing, and the Charred were crawling up the sides, onto the deck, assaulting the bulbous structure at the back.

Nomad arrived and, with a powerful bound, hauled himself up onto the front deck. He glanced toward the cab and found that the blast shield was hanging off, melted and warped. Through the window beyond, he saw Zeal and Rebeke desperately holding the back door closed against a group of Charred on the other side.

On the deck with Nomad, a familiar Charred—the one with the streaks across his face, like a fire poker had been taken to his cheeks—turned away from where he'd cracked the windshield with his truncheon. He saw Nomad and smiled broadly. He stepped forward, perhaps anticipating another easy fight.

With a concerted effort, Nomad formed a fist around the small, offworld sunheart—feeling it leech away heat from him. It tore at the crust on his soul. The Torment gave him some boons, and he wouldn't want to be completely rid of it. But a little skimming off the top and…

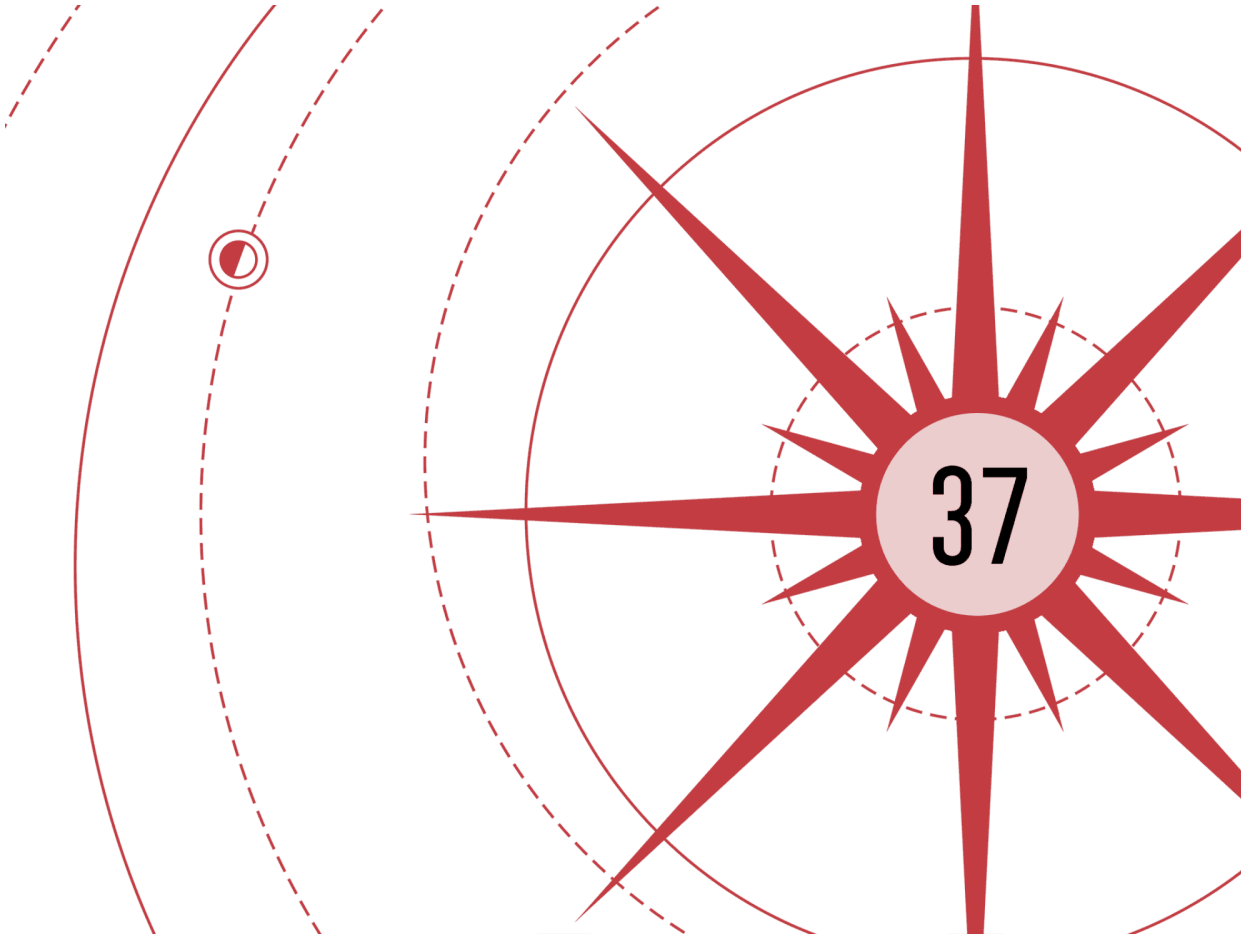
The Charred rushed him.

And Nomad—crashing through the numbness that tried to stop him—slammed his fist into the creature's gut. The Charred let out an *oof* as Nomad tossed him back against the ship's windshield.

Almost as one, the Charred who had been climbing or trying to break in turned toward him, rainwater dripping from their pale skin, their stone hearts glowing.

Lightning splintered the sky as Nomad raised that glorious fist before himself. Wit would have appreciated the dramatic moment. Nomad just grinned.

"Storms, yes," he whispered. "*Finally.*"



THE CHARRED CLAMBERING onto the deck howled and shouted at him, which served—beautifully—to draw the attention of the ones inside the ship. They left the door to the cockpit that Zeal and Rebeke had been defending, and piled out to join their fellows on the deck—as they had just found a far more engaging fight.

Nomad tried to form a spear but felt resistance in the action—his soul was still being lanced, and some remnants of the canker remained. Instead he held his hands forward and formed a simple bo staff—a length of silvery metal six feet long. For some reason, leaving the spearhead off made it work, and he cocked a smile—remembering a similar story told to him by a friend from long ago.

He made a hole in the haft the proper size, then slid the offworlder's sunheart inside so he could touch it while holding the weapon. As he did, Auxiliary oohed—which was distinctively amusing in his monotone.

I can feel the power of that sunheart growing, the knight says. I…I might be able to draw upon the Investiture you are putting into it. Why? I can't use the power of the canker on your soul.

"Filtered and purified, maybe," he said, raising his staff. "Not really the time to ponder it."

This will give you a few hundred BEUs. Use them well.

He'd need to. Some twenty Charred—crawling up over the side of the ship or scrambling out from inside the cab—surrounded him. Even the one he'd punched earlier stood up, his cinderheart flaring with passion.

Twenty to one. Bad odds, even for one such as him. Still, he launched into the first group of them, determined to keep as much open space around himself as possible. His worst danger here was getting pulled down, smothered, overwhelmed. Hopefully they'd underestimate him. Either way, to win against such superior numbers, his best option was to hit quickly, hit repeatedly, and keep the enemy uncertain.

Fortunately, if there was one lesson he'd learned well over the years, it was how to keep moving.

He crashed among the Charred, throwing several of them back. Glowing cinderhearts lit the deck like a fading midnight campfire—washed out occasionally by white lightning from above. Three swung batons, which Nomad expertly deflected, his muscles—and soul—as eager for this as he was. He slammed one behind the knee with the bottom of his staff—sending her sliding to the deck in the rain—then shoved aside another before stepping back and swinging the end of the staff up with the force of a man who had been held back too long.

Lightning flashed as he hooked the third Charred under the chin with enough power to send him into the air—teeth exploding from his mouth when lower jaw met top.

Nomad spun directly into the next batch, rainwater spraying from his arms as he swept around—dropping the staff and dismissing it while snatching the sunheart out of the air—and formed a shield that blocked the next three attacks. He heaved forward—hurling them back—then dropped the shield just in time to form another staff and come in swinging at the woman he'd tripped earlier.

He hit her with the force of a thunderclap, sending her soaring off the deck, spraying water.

Another swing sent a Charred to the deck, skull cracking against the steel.

His next attack dropped three at once with a sweep to the legs.

The next broke an arm, forcing the Charred to drop her weapon and howl in pain as Nomad sent the woman into a pile of her companions with a swift kick.

He was the rain, suddenly freed from the cloud and cast into the sky. He was the lightning, so eager to move that it jumped through empty space with frenzied splintering. He was the thunder that hit when you weren't expecting it, warping the air with its rhythms. He was the storm. Falling on foreign lands, but still the same as it had always been.

He threw Charred aside like dolls. He shattered bones, dropped people off the side into the mud, flung them out in the rain. On this world, they were elite warriors—but this was a planet where men did not train for battle, and it had *never* seen anything like him before.

The cab, Nomad, Auxiliary said—watching out for him, even as Nomad was using his carcass as a weapon. One Charred, sneakier than the rest, had slipped through to the cockpit while Zeal and Rebeke watched Nomad fight.

As the creature reared up behind them—the glow from its chest bloodying the chamber—Nomad skidded up outside. Then—with a firm demand—he gave the order.

Spear!

A glittering spearhead etched with patterns from his homeland formed from mist on the end of the staff just as he rammed it right through the windshield, sending the spear into the cinderheart of the Charred inside.

The cinderheart cracked. The light went out. The creature's eyes burned, each giving off a puff of dark smoke as the body collapsed backward.

The Charred who had been battling on the deck all froze. That gave Nomad enough of a breather to see the stunned Rebeke and Zeal gaping at him. They belatedly turned toward the dead Charred behind them, then looked back at him with expressions that were somehow even *more* amazed.

Nomad, Auxiliary said, *you're flirting with low levels of Investiture. You haven't had a chance to fully regain your enhanced strength and endurance. You can't defeat all of these creatures.*

Unfortunately there was truth to that. The Charred, now wary, were getting up. Gathering themselves and healing. They might not be trained, but they *were* strongly Invested, while he was running on fumes. Their next assault wouldn't underestimate him so soundly.

Nomad reached in and whipped the spear back, then raised his hands—one holding the spear—toward Zeal in a gesture that Nomad considered the

universal symbol for, “What the hell?” He then waved his hand upward, to indicate they should take off.

Zeal cringed and nodded, going for the controls. Nomad turned toward the remaining Charred, gathered hesitantly at the bow of the small deck. Their caution told him they could still feel fear. The Cinder King’s control wasn’t absolute.

It does make me feel guilty, the knight notes, that we have to treat them like this. They’re victims too.

It was truth, but one that Nomad had long ago made peace with. You didn’t always get to fight the right people. In fact, you often had to fight the wrong ones—at least until you could stop the men and women who gave the orders.

Perhaps there was another option today. He fell into a stance, spear at the ready. Then, to the beat of thunder and the applause of lightning, he began spinning and twisting, moving his spear through an intimidating set of training maneuvers.

They called it the Chasm Kata. The very first he’d ever seen, and he knew firsthand how intimidating it looked. Stepping forward with each twist of the spear, each foot hitting like a drumbeat—solid and firm despite the slick surface. The spear spun so fast, it reflected nearby cinderhearts almost like a mirror. Battering back the rain, an extension of himself—flipping, spinning, then lunging for a split second. Like frozen lightning.

Then motion again, ever advancing, step after inevitable step. Forward toward the watching Charred, who—with unconscious alarm—pulled back. They huddled against the railing of the bow, and behind them—hovering close on his own ship—Nomad saw a pair of glowing eyes in the darkness. The Cinder King, watching. Awed. Maybe even scared.

Yes… Nomad could see it was true, for the Cinder King’s terror was manifest on the horrified faces of the Charred to whom he was linked. The man was realizing how lucky he was that Nomad hadn’t agreed to duel him. He was realizing exactly how dead he would be if the fight had come to him.

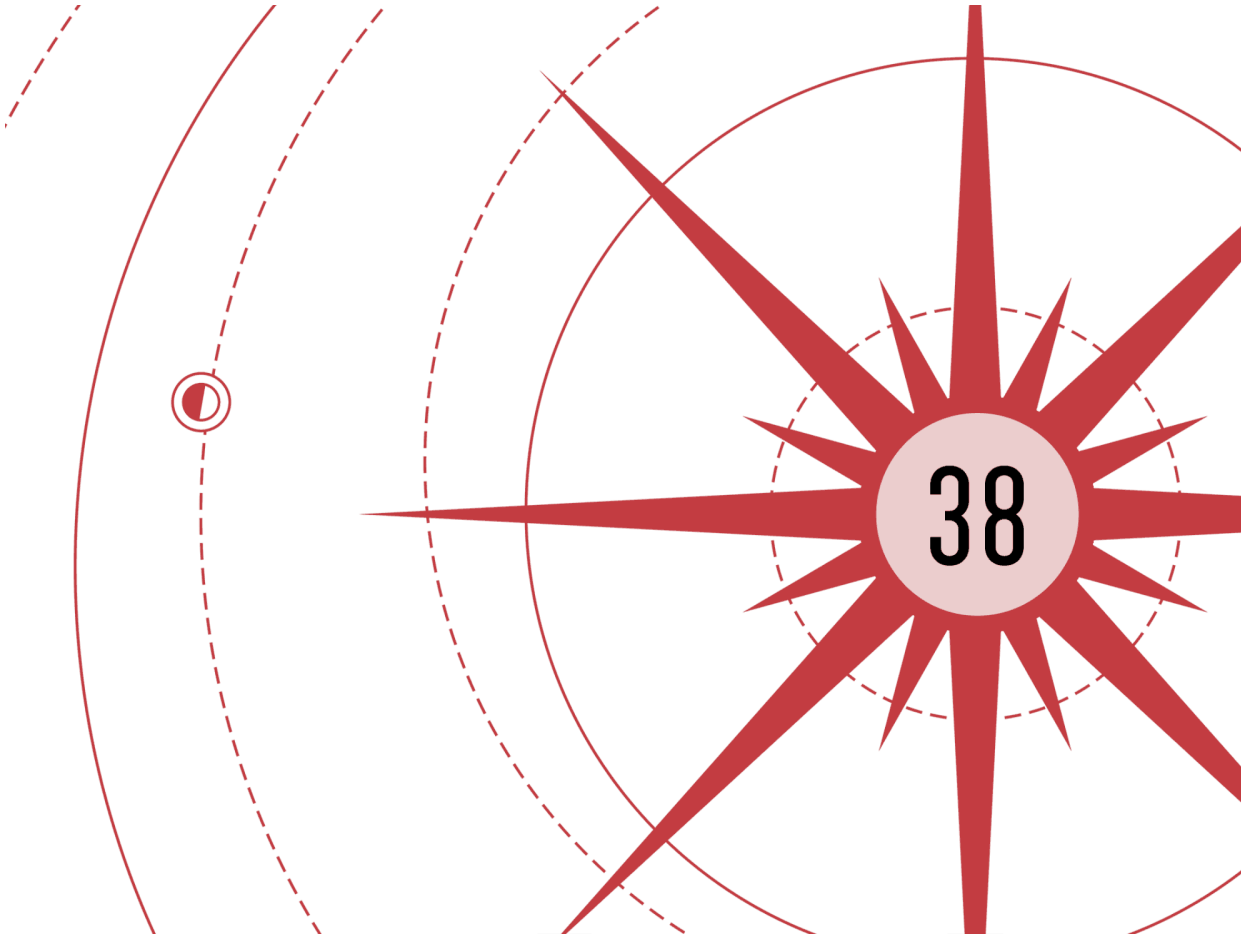
Nomad came to the final spin and step, planting his feet, spear fully extended so that it nearly touched the closest Charred. Then he swept backward into a standing position, dismissing the spear and catching the little offworlder sunheart in one hand. He arranged his arms in a cross pattern, wrists touching, and softly mouthed the words.

“Bridge Four.”

They couldn’t know the weight those words had for him. But the entire display—with the dead Charred behind him in the cab and the ship finally taking off—was enough. The surviving Charred scrambled off the ship, fleeing before him, dropping to the mud below.

He suspected they’d never have broken like that if the Cinder King hadn’t been there, watching and realizing with horror what he’d almost encountered.

Or perhaps Nomad was just projecting emotions onto the man. He was too distant now to make out his expression. Regardless, as they fled into the night with the sunhearts, no one gave pursuit.



THEY CALLED HER ELEGY.

The captive Charred continued to mull over that name as the ship soared back toward Beacon. She'd watched the killer's display on the deck, though her view had been partially obstructed. She'd had to lean to the side, look out through the open door between rooms, past the two people at the controls, through the windshield, into the darkness.

She'd watched him fight, and had hungered.

That. She wanted *that*.

She could not be Elegy again. She did like the name; the part of her that knew words understood what it meant. A song for the dead. And she was dead. It fit.

Elegy. She would be Elegy. Not the *same* Elegy, but different people could have the same name.

The killer stepped through the door and closed it behind him, soaking wet, bare-chested. She felt as if he should have a cinderheart glowing there. It

was wrong that he didn't. One did not fight as he did without a cinderheart.

Yet he had. And far, *far* better than the Charred.

She wanted that.

He had told her she should live for something. She had just seen that he was right. The rest of the Charred, they'd fought like children, like bullies with no training. He had fought with the grace of the wind itself, fully in control, channeling his anger and his *frenzy* into his smooth motions.

A weapon was far, far more dangerous when the tip was sharp. When you could put all your force into that single point. And her anger, her desire to fight and move and do and act and kill and strain and struggle… All of that would be *far* more dangerous if she could channel it into a single point as well.

That was why he'd won. The Charred were bludgeoning weapons, while he was a spear.

The woman stepped out of the cab. The one they called Rebeke, Elegy's sister. She met the killer, then pulled back, as if before a bonfire. She clasped her gloved hands before her and stood in place.

"That was incredible," Rebeke whispered. "It was also terrible. So terrible."

"The art and butchery of the spear," he said. "I know. Zeal, you should call in that we're on our way!"

"Already raising them," he called. "We had to escape the bubble of the Cinder King's ships. They had a radio jammer in place."

Rebeke went to help care for the four others, who had been knocked out in the heat and were only now recovering. They were weaker than Elegy was. So she didn't bother with them.

A moment later, a voice came from the cockpit. Elegy tilted her head back —as if not alive with constant energy trying to make her move—and listened. She had to learn to listen. Had to learn to control it.

Only then could she fight as he had.

"Zeal?" a woman's voice said over the radio. One of the old ones who led. "Oh, praise Adonalsium. Did you get them?"

"Five sunhearts," he said. "They're sitting in a sack right next to me, Confidence. We're on our way."

"How long?" The old woman sounded scared.

Elegy hadn't understood fear until just now, when she'd felt it along with the other Charred. Because she'd lied to the killer. Though she no longer

heard the voice, she *could* still feel the Cinder King. His emotions, which had—just now—included fear.

"I beg a moment as I calculate our course," Zeal said. "How…how are you all?"

"The sun continues to advance, and our opportunities to outrun it diminish. There is a corridor of darkness, the peak of the mountains touching the shadow. Alas, it vanishes quickly. Two of our ships are beyond repair. We've moved everyone onto the remaining eight, but there is not room for them all inside, so some sit upon the decks. Waiting."

"We'll have the sunhearts divided into parts by the time we arrive," Zeal said. "Have everyone ready to go. We'll be there in…a little over half an hour. Hopefully."

"May you outrun the sun, Zeal," the old woman whispered.

Rebeke took out her knife to divide the sunhearts, and the killer stepped up to her. "Can you spare one of those for me?" he asked.

She stared at him, then at the stolen sunhearts, clearly mentally calculating what Beacon would need. She met his eyes and nodded, handing a full sunheart to the killer. He walked away, holding it up near his face. Then the light of it faded, and his eyes seemed to glow for a moment.

He did have his own cinderheart inside. It simply wasn't visible.

"I watched you fight," Elegy whispered as he settled down nearby.

He glanced at her.

"I want that," she said. "I want to do what you did. I want to be able to *kill* like you killed."

He thought for a bit before speaking. "I'd hoped," he said, "that spending time with your sister, with this people, would make you start to want the things they have. Not the things I do. The old Elegy—"

"I'm not her," Elegy cut in. "I can never *be* her. I want to learn battle like you do it. You said that I need to focus on something, deliberately. I have chosen."

"You'll need control," he said, "for my kind of fighting."

"I figured that out already," she said. "I know it. But how? How did you learn?"

"Slowly," he said, leaning back against the wall, eyes closed. "Step by step, Elegy."

"I don't understand."

"When I was first given a spear," he said, "I didn't know how to hold it. I didn't even know how to *stand*. Each time I sparred, I had to dedicate all my

thoughts to standing correctly. The more I did it, the more natural that stance became. It's like…I didn't just learn the lesson, I internalized it. That left my conscious mind free to think about something else. Since my body now stood properly on its own, I could wonder about how I held the spear.

"Then *that* grip became natural, so I could focus on thrusting with precision. I could learn to change my grip, resetting my stance so that I was oriented toward the enemy. Each of these things slowly became instinct. Through deliberate practice—to learn that *specific* thing. And each time, once internalized, that left my mind free to try something else. To be honest, though, I had a huge advantage over most people on this path."

"You had teachers?" she asked.

"No. I could survive mistakes." Looking weary, he opened his eyes. "I got Invested, like you. It came to me via some oaths I made and a bond to a being of pure Investiture. Like that rock at your core, but with a worse sense of humor."

She thought she heard something then, as she sometimes did around him. A different voice that seemed to say…a joke?

"My Investiture let me survive wounds I shouldn't have," he continued, "and learn from my mistakes in a way that is exceptionally difficult to do as a soldier. Normally you end up dead, and all your learning evaporates like rainwater in the sunlight.

"But *I* could learn, keep growing, until…" He held his hands out to the sides. "Until I became what you see. A mess of a man sometimes, but one with instincts for battle honed over decades."

"I want it," she whispered.

"I suppose that will do," he said, then reached up—as if to let her out of her last manacle.

She immediately felt her eagerness growing. The heat from inside her cinderheart spreading through her body. The thirst for the fight energizing her.

"No," she forced herself to say, making him hesitate.

"Why?" he asked.

"If you set me free," she said, "I *will* attack you. All of you. I feel it." She paused though, feeling… *Feeling.* Feeling something other than the heat. "But that is progress, isn't it? That I spoke to you of it?"

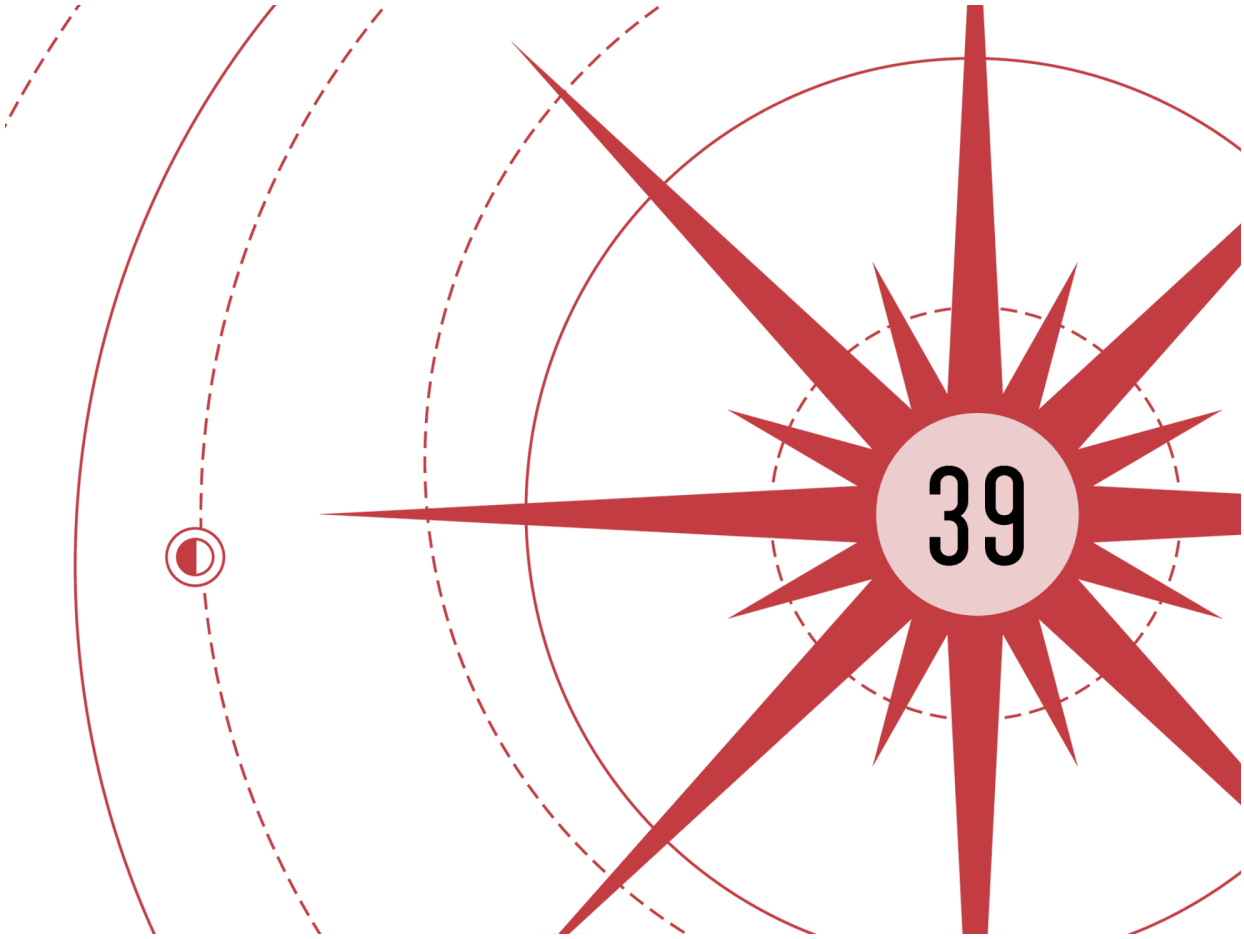
"I'll take it as such," he said, nodding and leaning away from her bond. "Thanks for the warning. But you're going to have to learn to control it. If you don't, you'll never learn anything else."

“I can fight,” she said, “even with that heat.”

He shook his head. “It’s not enough just to fight, Elegy. Those other Charred, they could be left in a pit to fight for centuries, and they’d barely learn anything. You must choose to practice. Choose to learn.” He met her eyes. “Choose to control it.”

She nodded slowly, then settled back, thinking. Until they neared the place where the ships had crashed.

Where it was growing dangerously bright.



EIGHT PEOPLE MET the *Dawnchaser*, one for each of the remaining ships of Beacon. They went running as soon as they were tossed their chunk of sunheart.

Nomad stood on the deck, looking up, sweat running down his brow. The peaks of the mountains above looked aflame. Indeed, they probably *were* on fire. The pounding sunlight just on the other side of those peaks was liquifying the stone.

He stepped back as he saw something shoot up on the other side, visible even at this great distance. A jet of magma, reaching high past the atmosphere. Like a sunspot.

Storms. He'd thought he possessed a basic understanding of geology, despite needing a crash course in tectonics after leaving his homeworld. But he had *no idea* what would cause mountains to spring up anew with each passing of the sun, after they were melted down into nothing.

Rebeke dashed up to the ship and nodded to him before climbing into the cockpit. She had to shove past the people they'd crammed in there, now that two more ships had to be left behind.

Rebeke's return meant that the convoy was ready. She lifted the *Dawnchaser* off, looking out through a windshield that still had a spear hole in it.

Nomad remained on the deck, not wanting to deal with the packed interior. Plus, out here, he could feel the wind, cold against his scalp. His hair wouldn't grow back until he had more Investiture to spare. At least he'd been given some trousers, a belt, and a buttoned shirt. He'd left the collar undone.

He leaned out, hands on the railing, watching the other eight ships lift off—leaving two broken ones at the foot of the mountain. Together, they fled with everything they had left. He turned, glancing toward the other horizon. He thought he could see the darkness of the shadow ahead—the dark side of the planet—but he wasn't certain.

It was a race of a very specific kind. They could move far faster than the sun would rise, but they weren't just trying to outrun it. Right now, they were within a pool of darkness in the shape of a mountain. Like the shadow of a tree on a sunny morning, stretching long at first—but shrinking as the sun climbed the sky.

Would they be able to run the length of that shadow and escape into the night? Or would they get to the edge, only to find a fiery gap between them and safety? Ever widening, driving them back, until they were destroyed as the last shade vanished?

It was going to be close. He could read it in the way the convoy pushed their engines to their utmost, despite the recent slapdash repairs. There wasn't time to coddle the machines. If something went wrong, they died. They might die anyway. So they pushed, burning away the very souls of their deceased loved ones in a mad rush toward safety.

He witnessed it from the lead ship. Elegy's vessel, though a bulbous exploring machine, was still faster than the large transports behind. Rebeke slowed her ship to stay with the others—but then sped up, likely after being chewed out for delaying. Compassion herself had insisted all the ships fly at their best speed and not slow if others had troubles.

Right now, they had to pray, flee, and hold firm. Compassion, in this context, had to be about the survival of their people.

That last one, the knight says, is a lot slower than the rest…

Nomad could just barely make out what he meant. Far down the line, the final ship was struggling. It wasn't the one with the Chorus; that was near the middle of the pack. Instead it was the bulky water tower ship, now packed with people—a number of them huddled outside, on the deck.

Nomad looked up at the ridge, which glowed like a crown. Then the tips of the peaks began to melt, magma pouring down the back side.

Nomad, I feel something, Auxiliary said. *Do you feel that? What is it?*

"I don't know what you…"

He trailed off as he saw it in the air beside him. A small fracture, a misalignment—like how a broken mirror might reflect a disjointed image. It floated beside his head, the size of a fingernail. There was something familiar about it.

"It's one of my fragments," he whispered. "A piece of my armor. You said those were dead!"

I thought they were gone, consumed.

Why was it back now? What had happened?

Was it because he fought again?

Was it because of *why* he had fought again?

He turned back down the line of terrified ships. That last one had fallen farther behind.

"Aux," he asked. "How much do we have?"

Roughly six percent Skip capacity. Just over your strength threshold.

"Enough, though," he whispered. "Maybe enough?"

For what?

Nomad dashed forward and leaped. He soared above a washed-out mudscape, air tugging at him—as if to cradle him—until he slammed down on the deck of the ship next in line. He ran across this as the people at the sides cried out.

Ahead, light began to break around the peaks, like floodwaters through a failing dam. He vaulted himself again, into the arms of the wind, and landed on the top of the Chorus's ship.

He ran. Ran *toward* the sun, soaring, landing, bounding along the line of ships until he reached the next to last one—and looked across a much wider gap between it and the final straggler. People on deck backed away, watching him with awe as he took a breath, then *ran* for everything he had and threw himself into the sky.

He hung there, locking gaze with the looming dawn, until he hit the final deck and rolled. He came up with gritted teeth, dashing for the back of the

ship, passing terrified people. As he arrived, he manifested Auxiliary as a shield.

"Bigger, Aux," he growled.

How big?

"Bigger! Use it all!"

The sun finally crested the rise. And Auxiliary burned away Nomad's Investiture, growing.

Light exploded around them, the force of it beating against the shield, driving him backward—but Auxiliary, using the power of that sunheart, had grown truly large. Big as a building, big enough to shelter the entire ship.

The blazing fire of an angry sun washed over the shield. It set the air ablaze at the sides, as if Nomad were standing with shield braced not against mere light—but against the flaming breath spat by some fearsome beast of lore. The shield remained secure, and Nomad held it in place, grunting at the force of the solar fury. Sweating, he put his shoulder against it, and looked back to see the wide-eyed people. Surprised to be surviving their very first dawn.

A second later, the ship passed into the shadows and the heat vanished. Nomad dismissed the shield and slumped against the railing, dumbfounded by a sudden flood of exhaustion. He felt numb, he felt cold, he felt…

Normal.

Storms. This was what it was like to be without even a single drop of Investiture. It had been a very, very long time.

I can't believe that worked, the knight whispers with boundless shock and enthusiasm.

Nomad shook his head, lying back on the deck, feeling weak. Unaware of his surroundings. Tired. The weight of years and years pressing against him.

I felt something from that light, Auxiliary said. *Something very unusual. Did you sense the force of it? Light shouldn't push like that, Nomad.*

"It was being pulled into the ground," Nomad whispered. "Like…an electric current. Like lightning, forming a current between cloud and ground—only this time, between sunlight and the core of the planet."

Storms. That was it. That's why he could stand on the deck up high and not be aflame. Because he hadn't been between the sun and the planet. That was why sunhearts were charged so much as they were made. That was why the ground melted.

Everything between the sun and the core…it acted like the filament of an incandescent light bulb. Superheated by the transfer of energy.

Something roused him from his stupor. Were those…

Cheers?

He numbly picked himself up off the deck, standing straighter as he looked along the column of ships. The cheers came from those ahead, who rejoiced in having made it into the shadows.

The Beaconites on this last ship didn't shout. They stared at Nomad, trembling, overwhelmed. They knew. Though they'd only been in the sunlight for a moment, that would have been enough to vaporize their ship. Being that close to death rattled a person.

Someone familiar stood at the front of the group. He hadn't realized that Contemplation was on this ship. She knelt, holding a young girl, and looked at Nomad.

He braced himself for further adulation. Instead she just bowed her head, hugged the girl to her breast, and whispered, "Thank you."

Nomad nodded, then slumped by the railing—barely aware—as they flew. Eventually they landed a safe distance into the dark side, beneath the specular light of the rings. The ships set down in a circle. There, amid plants growing with uncanny speed, they offered prayer.

He'd remained on the ship as each of them left and knelt. He'd never seen it done this way, with everyone kneeling together. They let Confidence lead, but each seemed to be saying their own version, quietly. To Nomad's people, religion, the monarchy, and certain levels of bureaucracy were all intertwined. He'd been modestly religious himself, and still accepted the idea of a God Beyond.

But he'd never seen something like this prayer, so raw, so tearful, so *genuine*. He climbed to his feet and couldn't help but watch, couldn't help but feel the energy.

The people began to rise, and the Greater Good gathered at the heart of the circle they'd formed. There, they waved him forward.

Perhaps he should just have walked away, but the cynical part of him… well, it seemed to have been put to sleep by the fatigue of being completely without Investiture. He stumbled down off the ship, then walked through the undulating, growing grass to stand before the Greater Good.

Each of the three women removed a glove and held a hand toward him, taking his hand in their gnarled ones.

"It won't work," he told them. "Offering me your heat."

"It didn't before," Compassion whispered, seated as always. "But you weren't one of us then."

“I’ve been told by Rebeke,” Contemplation said, “that you prefer not to be called Sunlit.”

He nodded, feeling strangely self-conscious with everyone watching him. “I’d rather be known for what I’ve done, not for some prophecy.”

“You go by the name Nomad. Why?” Confidence asked, squeezing his hand.

“It is the name I deserve. And it sounds a little like my birth name, in my own language.”

“Which is?”

“Sigzil,” he whispered. For some reason, speaking it again after so long brought tears to his eyes.

“Nomad,” Compassion said. “A wanderer with no place. That name no longer fits you, Sigzel, because you have a place. Here, with us.” She said the name a little oddly, according to their own accents.

“Will you accept a name from us?” Contemplation asked. “One you deserve and have earned?”

Feeling numb, he nodded.

“We name you Zellion,” Contemplation said. “After the original Lodestar, who led us to this land and to life. As you have led us.”

“Zellion,” he whispered.

“It means One Who Finds,” Compassion said. “Though I know not the original language.”

“It’s from Yolen,” he whispered. “Where my master was born.”

“Zellion,” Confidence said. “You are one of us now. Whatever you’ve run from, whatever you’ve left, whatever you’ve done—none of that matters. Here, you are of Beacon, of the planet Canticle. We welcome you. We accept you.”

He tried to spit out an argument. Something about how you couldn’t make someone your own with words. You couldn’t *erase* what someone had done with kindly sentiment.

Could you?

Words are power, the knight whispers, as long as they have meaning. As long as they have Intent.

“I…” he whispered. “I accept.”

Warmth flooded into him through their grip. He gasped, eyes going wide. The three elderly women smiled at him as he dropped to his knees, feeling an *ignition* within him. They stepped back, releasing his hand. But then each of the other people, even the children, approached in turn. One at a time,

they touched him with ungloved hands. A hand to his. A touch on the side of the face. A few hugs.

Each of them imparted warmth, until he was *afire* with it. Until he knelt there wondering why he didn't glow like the sun. They stood back, and let it burn within him.

That's not much in the way of BEUs, Auxiliary said. *Less than a single percent combined—but a remarkable amount for each person to give up, though, as they have.*

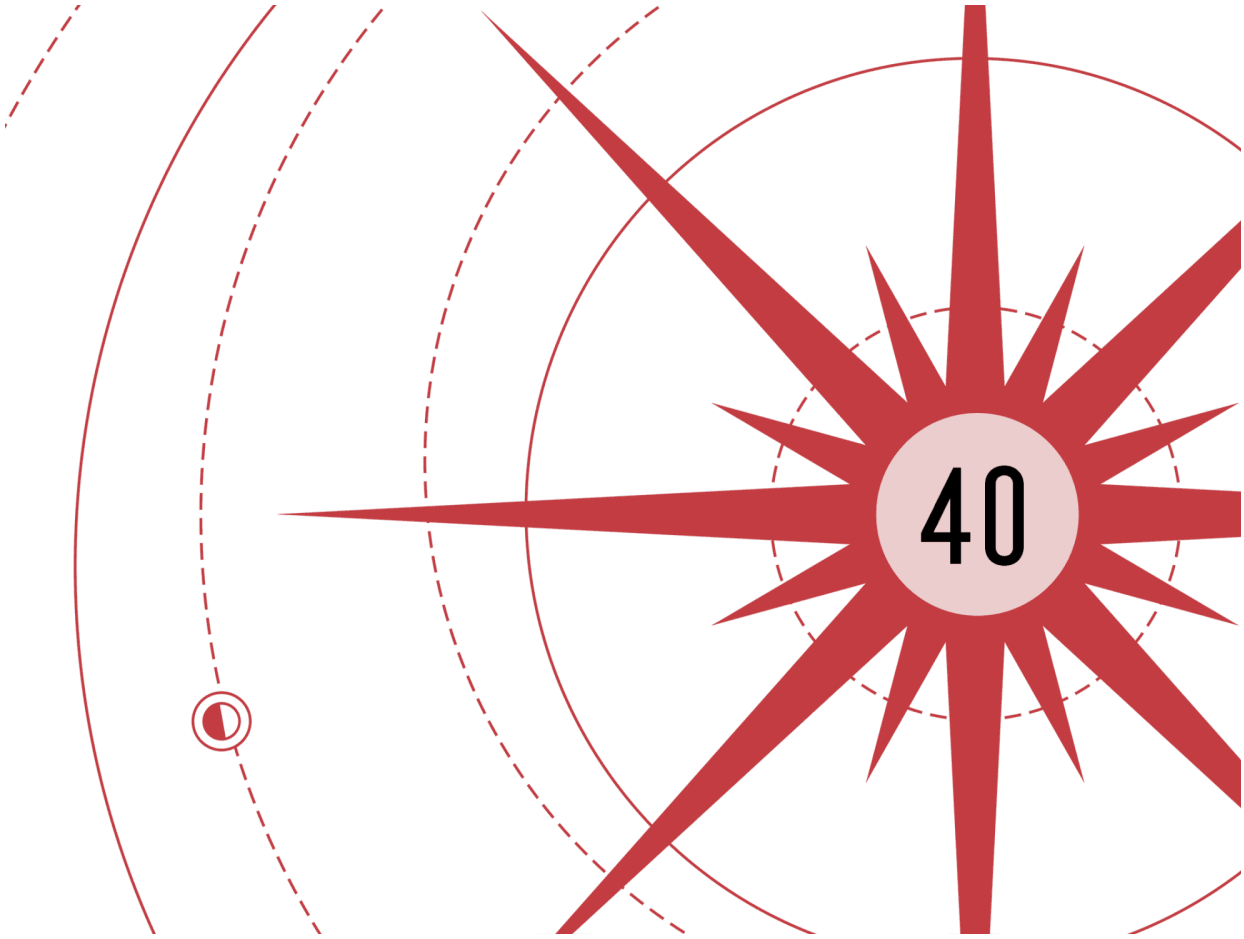
It felt like so much more. Perhaps it was being without, then having the Investiture returned. Perhaps it was something else, something special about how this was given. In contrast to his earlier numbness, he now felt more alive than he had in years.

The Greater Good approached again. "Zellion," Contemplation said, "this is our thanks to you. But…we have work to do. One final task. We need to find the way into the Refuge."

"You have a plan?" Confidence asked. "To get us there?"

"Yes," he said, voice hoarse. "But…could I have a moment or two to process this first, please?"

"Of course," Compassion said. "You have given us all each and every moment we have, from now until we are given to the sun. Please, take some for yourself."



HE DIDN'T WANT to go back to his room because Elegy was there. He wanted to be alone. So he strolled away from the group of ships, looking toward the sky. He'd seen rings on other planets, but never ones so vivid, so colorful, and so bright.

But like so many things in life, it was a trade-off. Vibrant rings. Terrible sun. Hand in hand, dreads and beauties. Same as they were inside a person like him. If he hadn't been through the terrible experiences that had scarred him, he'd never have been able to fight to rescue Rebeke and Zeal.

But if he hadn't been through those horrors, he also wouldn't have been broken.

He stepped up onto a rise. The earth was springy underfoot, and as he stood on the hill, plants grew up around his feet, tickling his shins. His shoes —not proper boots, as he liked, but they were all the Beaconites had been able to provide—were too new, unbroken. They hadn't seen horrors yet, and so they were inflexible.

But once they got worn in, they also would start to wear out. Could a soul wear out, likewise? In his youth, he'd have said that was impossible. That souls weren't like pieces of cloth or leather; that people were too valuable to ever be "worn out." Yet here he was. Taking this people's offered warmth and love, all while leading them toward a lie.

That was beautiful, what they did, Auxiliary said. *You're Connected fully to this place, somehow. You're a man of two homeworlds now.*

"And we'll have to leave this one too," he said, voice hoarse. "We'll have to keep running. Like always."

Yes, that is true. Perhaps we can enjoy it for a time first, though?

Zellion hissed softly, frustration spoiling the moment. What was there to enjoy? The knowledge that these people were doomed? That he'd saved them not to bring *them* to salvation, but so they could help *him* get to safety?

Beside him, a tree was growing—a long, thin shoot, sprouting leaves that trembled like the legs of a toddler taking her first steps. He watched it, then turned away—coming face-to-face with Rebeke, who was striding up the small hill, holding a new coat for him made of the same brown leather as before.

Auxiliary would have noticed her coming, but hadn't said anything. Traitor. And as she joined him—pale face cast in ringlight, holding out that jacket—he realized she hadn't been there earlier. When everyone had presented him with heat. She'd been with the Chorus, having this jacket fabricated for him. He took it, hesitant, worried about that look in her eyes.

She slipped off her glove, then held out her hand. "I didn't get a chance," she said, "to thank you."

He caught her hand by the clothed portion of her wrist as she reached for him. Stopping her from touching his face.

"Why?" she asked. "You let the others."

"I think you might want to give something more than they did," he replied.

She met his eyes briefly, like the fleeting bob of a lifespren, then glanced away, blushing. "Why not?" she asked. "Why shouldn't we find a little comfort in the few hours remaining before we fly back out? They might be the last hours we have."

"I don't begrudge you comfort, Rebeke," he said. "You deserve it. But not with me. I'm too old for you."

"Old? I'm of age. What is a decade or so difference considering what we've been through?"

“A decade or so?” he asked, smiling. He nodded his chin toward the ring of ships. “You see those old women who lead your folk? I’m older than they are.”

She turned toward him, jaw dropping.

He nodded in response.

“Well,” she eventually said, “I don’t care.”

“I do,” he said gently. “Even if I didn’t, Rebeke, I’m going to leave soon. Whatever happens, I must walk away, abandon you all. I can’t stay.

“Before you object and say you wouldn’t care about that either, you’re wrong. My years haven’t given me wisdom, but they have given me knowledge. And I know, I *know*, the hurt it causes when I leave. Assuming I’ve made mistakes. Assuming I’ve let attachments grow.”

She glanced to the side, where he’d rested his hand on the fledgling bough of the growing tree—where little snaking vines had wound around his fingers. Though he tried to pull back gently, he ended up snapping them anyway.

“You could stay,” she whispered. “We could fight whatever is hunting you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he told her, smiling gently. “You have *no idea*.”

“We thought cresting a mountain was impossible, yet here we are,” she said. “We could climb your mountain too, Zellion.”

Zellion. He did like how the word sounded. Perhaps that was his now-reinforced Connection to their land, and this people. Such an odd thing, Spiritual Connection. He couldn’t even rightly say what it would do to him. Some uses of Investiture were easily quantified, others were…well, as arcane as the human soul itself.

“I’m sorry,” he told Rebeke. “But no. I can’t be this person you’re looking for.”

She looked away sharply, then slid her glove back on. She didn’t run away in shame or embarrassment, which made him feel slightly better. But she also didn’t meet his eyes as she stood there, on the top of the hill, looking up at the rings.

“I no longer want to learn to kill like you do,” she finally said, voice soft. “I don’t want to be that terrible.” She blushed again. “Not that you are…I mean—”

“It’s all right,” he said. “It *is* terrible.”

“Beautiful too.”

“I used to believe that,” he said. “Though…”

She cocked her head, glancing at him.

“There was a time,” he said, “when I could stand tall even when fighting. A time before my Torment seized me.” He took in her confused stare, and felt moved to give her something. An explanation, to soften his rejection. “I was a knight,” he said, “of a very exclusive order. Two different orders actually, at two different times. For the first, I was one of their leaders, with oaths that were supposed to turn what I did from terrible into—if not beautiful—honorable. But then…”

How to explain this next part? A part he didn’t fully understand himself. “I was given charge over an *extremely* dangerous item. Capable of killing gods. Laying waste to planets. I carried that burden, found new bonds, but the weapon consumed important parts of me. Shredded the soul of one of my dearest friends. Stole my armor. I was left a husk of what I’d once been. Not just because of what the weapon had done to me—but because of the things I’d done.”

He clasped his hands behind his back, remembering what it felt like to wear that uniform, bear that armor, carry those oaths. “I had to ask myself, once it was all done, if honor was a sham. If it was a ruse used to make men kill one another—to let them *pretend* there was a purpose to it. If that concept—the very idea of an honorable soldier—was not the most pernicious evil that had ever blighted the cosmere.”

“And what you did in protecting us?” she said softly. “Was that a blight? A pernicious evil?”

Storms, he didn’t want to have to make that call. Judge between evil and honor. He just wanted to keep running. Why did questions like this always bubble up if he stayed in one place too long?

How many excuses would he make for walking away? And would he ever be able to dig down within himself and find the actual reason he’d done it? Not the surface-level, easy explanation. But the core of what made him, of all people, capable of turning his back on everyone he’d loved?

Rebeke was waiting for an answer to her question. She looked at him, bright-eyed and curious.

“No,” he told her. “Protecting your people by fighting the Charred was not evil, Rebeke. But I don’t think I can ever call it beautiful again.” He shook his head. “You wouldn’t say so either. Not if you could look inside me and see how much *fun* I was having during that fight.”

She paled visibly. “I still want to find a way to help my people,” she said, looking away from him. “If not by fighting, then by leading. But there will be time, I suppose, to figure that out once we’ve found the Refuge.”

He grimaced. She’d storming handed him the opportunity, hadn’t she? Even if she didn’t know it. He couldn’t just saunter past that one and pretend nothing was wrong.

“Rebeke,” he forced himself to say. “I have to say it again. This sanctuary you’re looking for. It doesn’t—”

“Stop,” she said, spinning on him. “Don’t say it.”

“You should know what it actually is. A place created by outsiders to protect themselves. A—”

“You told us earlier there was a chance,” she said. “Is that still true? Is there *any* hope that a place exists where we can find safety?”

Storms, he wasn’t certain he could maintain that lie. This was almost certainly a Scadrian research facility, by that key. A place to house a small group of scientists come to study the way Canticle’s sun worked.

They would have watched this people with the cold detachment of researchers with subjects. He’d been there. He’d seen that kind of attitude. It wasn’t universal among scientists, but this would be a self-selecting group. And as proof, he knew they had done nothing to help so far, despite the terrible lives this people lived.

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “I see it in your eyes.”

“But—”

“We have a story,” she said, “about an ancient man who asked to know his fate. In it, hope was extinguished forever. For he knew the answer.”

“It’s…a common variety of myth,” he said. “I know a dozen variations from a dozen different planets.”

“I will not be that man,” she said. “I will maintain hope.”

“Then maintain hope in something real,” he said. “If the Refuge proves to not be real, you need to find another path to safety. The one your sister envisioned, Rebeke. Throwing off the rule of the Cinder King.”

“Where has that gotten us?”

“It’s made you into a beacon,” he said. “Others will see. There comes a time when every tyrant is weak or exposed. Given the chance, his people will topple him themselves.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain,” he said.

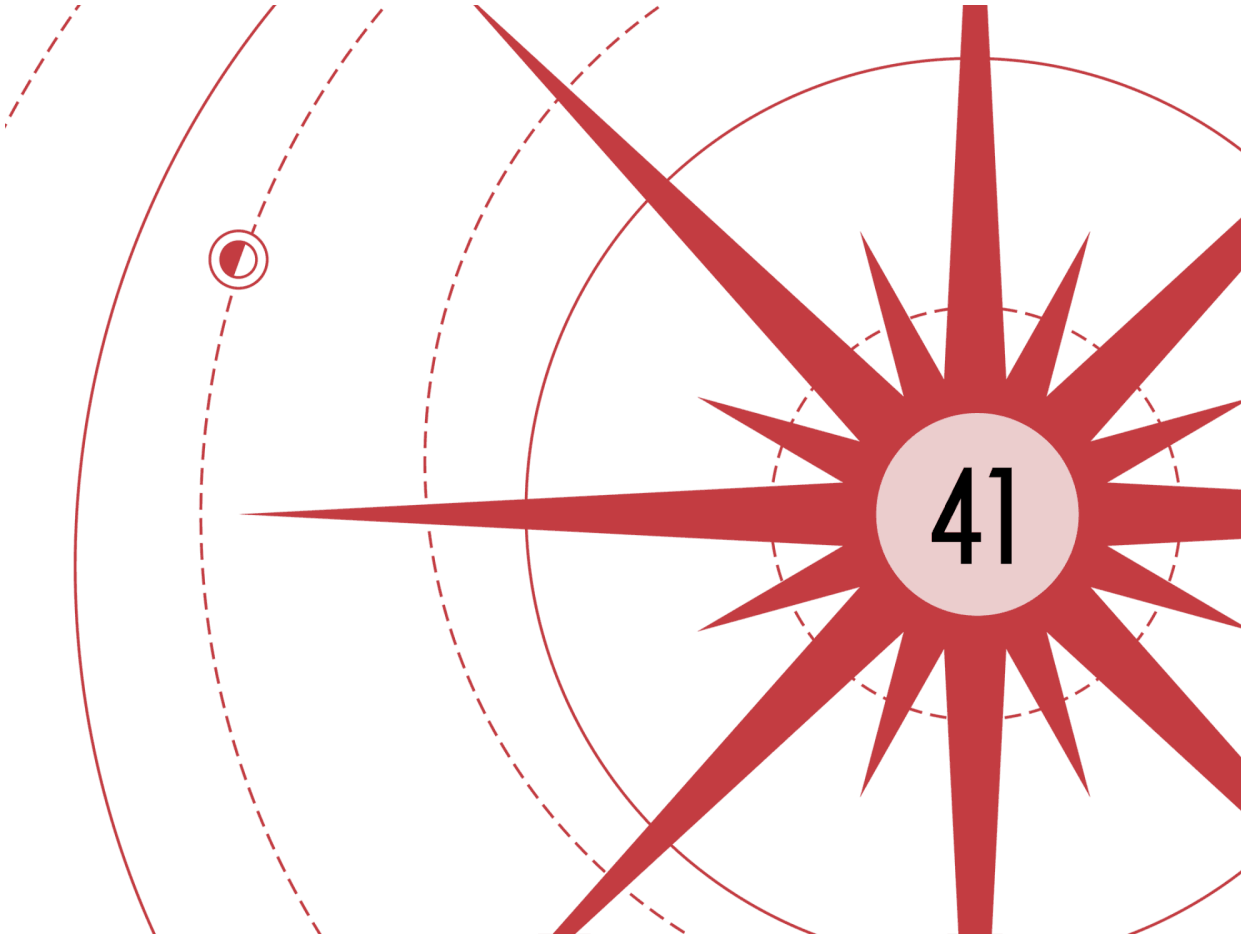
She thought a moment, but shook her head. “Elegy could have persuaded the people of Union to overthrow the Cinder King, but we don’t have that Elegy anymore. And we can’t survive any longer out here. We have ditched our farming equipment. We have a *single* prospector. We don’t have food, living space, supplies.

“Our only *real* hope is to find the Refuge. It’s what the Greater Good wants, and it’s what our people want. So keep your concerns to yourself. And leave us with hope.”

He took a deep breath, then nodded.

“All right, then,” she said. “What do we do next? How do we find the entrance and how do we get through the Cinder King’s forces to reach it? He knows we’ve survived. He’s going to array everything he has to stop us.”

“Well, this is where you’re fortunate to have a killer among you,” Zellion said. “Because it’s time to show the Cinder King what an *actual* battle looks like.”



REBEKE WAS RIGHT. The Cinder King *had* brought all his forces to bear. He lined them up, dozens of ships and hundreds of Charred, hovering in the air just outside the cloud cover of the shadow. Waiting exactly in the place where, one day ago, the Beaconites had tried to locate the Refuge.

Judging by the look of those forces, the Cinder King thought he was ready for anything. That made it oh so very sweet to watch as Zellion's ships emerged from the rain and opened fire with large, ship-mounted guns.

Balls of light as thick as a man's leg cut the twilight sky, shot from the cannons, ripping apart the Cinder King's forces like they were twigs before a highstorm. Ships went blazing to the ground, and Charred howled as they were blasted free from exploding decks.

The initial barrage—and the shock it prompted—was the primary thing Zellion was counting on. He rode in the lead ship, Elegy's ship, which had a single cannon welded to the roof. Four of their other ships had guns, while

the remaining four acted exclusively as transports, clogged with as many people as could be stuffed onto them.

The improvised gunship fire cut through the leading enemy ranks, punching a wide hole in the Cinder King's forces—which scattered. In that instant, Zellion's forces seemed invincible. He glanced to the side, to where Rebeke was piloting the *Dawnchaser*. In her eyes, he saw a feeling he'd once known. That feeling of terrible awe, of horror and nausea, when confronting your own capacity for destruction.

That was the moment it hit home—amid the roar and the silence of cannon fire. Watching people fall, torn apart by what you'd done. That moment changed a person.

Storms, he hoped the enemy responded with a similar stupor. One thing he'd learned in combat was this: never underestimate the sheer *panic* a coordinated strike can cause in an untrained line of troops. Many battles could be won in a single brilliant charge.

His ships flew right through the center of the enemy forces. Then kept going. Because he was certain the Refuge, if it existed, was *not* in this specific region.

"Shades!" Zeal's voice said from the radio. "That was a beautiful sight."

"I offer this warning," Solemnity Divine said. "Those shots drained our sunhearts something frightening. We don't have much left, after our flight here and what we gave Zellion. Be careful how much you fire them."

After Zellion had expended all of his Investiture to shield the final ship, the Greater Good had gladly offered him even more from each remaining sunheart. Enough to get him just over five percent Skip capacity, just barely above his minimum thresholds to maintain peak fighting capacity. Storms, he could barely remember what it was like to run around at fifty or sixty percent capacity, never needing to worry about running dry. How long had it been? Though he missed that, he found himself even more grateful for this five percent, in the face of Beacon's sacrifice.

"How certain are you," Confidence said, "in this plan of yours, Zellion? We could fly down low in the chaos and use our prospector to find the opening."

"It's not here," Zellion said, leaning down to the radio. "I promise you that, Confidence. We push forward. Projecting confidence—as you understand so well—at full speed."

They did so, ignoring the landscape they'd searched the day before. And despite the certainty he projected, his nerves betrayed him. This was a

gamble.

Zellion was betting—with everyone's lives as the ante—that the actual location was close. That the Cinder King had managed to keep the true location a secret, but only by a little. Like how a magician might focus everyone's attention on one hand, while the other secretly stacked the deck.

They knew the Cinder King's city always traveled in a straight line, periodically stopping to farm. Somewhere along that path, he tried to open the door to the Refuge. But Zellion was banking on the idea that, to prevent anyone from finding it, he'd arranged for inaccuracies to be propagated about its true location.

More, he was gambling that the Cinder King would be worried. That he'd be watching to see what Zellion did. That he'd be frightened, deep down, that his secret was not safe. That—

It's happening. Look to your right, ninety degrees.

"There!" Zellion said, pointing as a squadron that had been off to the side—including the Cinder King's own ship—turned and blasted backward. Ten ships, presumably among the fastest in the enemy's fleet, went flying on ahead.

They would lead everyone right to the doorway.

It's uncanny, you realize, how you can pick out what people are going to do sometimes.

"How?" Rebeke asked. "How did you know?"

"Deep down," he said, leaning forward, "the Cinder King is insecure. He worries he isn't as strong as he acts. He worries that it will all be taken from him: his throne, his power, his secrets. We are playing on those fears.

"We're saying, 'We know what we're doing. We know where the opening really is.' After all, why else would we commit everything to breaking through like this? Why else would we fly with such confidence right toward his secret location?"

"But we're not," she said. "We don't know where it is."

"He doesn't know that," Zellion said. "In his eyes, we've found him out. So now he needs to go protect it. He doesn't realize—he can't realize, because his insecurities are too overpowering and his intellect too underwhelming—that he's actually *leading* us right to his secret."

"Assuming we survive that long," Zeal said over the radio. "Some of those other ships are recovering. They're sweeping toward us."

Damnation. The enemy ships had indeed started to swarm back. They were probably realizing just how slow the Beaconite ships had to move to

protect those overloaded transports. Or perhaps they had seen that the guns were just welded in place and didn't have proper turrets.

For all their startling flash and bang, Zellion's forces were extremely vulnerable. "Rebeke," he said, "you're going to have to do what I told you."

"I don't know how to aim this thing, though!"

"Don't focus on shooting it. Focus on getting me where I need to be." Zellion grabbed a steel spear—fashioned for him by the Chorus—then left the cab, striding into the back room. He stopped beside Elegy, still chained by one hand to the wall.

"You're needed," he said, reaching for her chained wrist.

"I'm not ready!" she said. "I can't control it."

"A lesson for you," he said. "You never *get* to be ready. You just have to move forward anyway. That's something Kaladin taught me." He undid her manacle.

She immediately leaped to her feet, pushing toward him aggressively. He locked eyes with her and waited for the punch. Which…through a battle conveyed by the twisting of expressions on her face…never came.

Something thumped from outside—a Charred jumping onto their deck. He had little hope they'd be scared away by a simple kata this time. The Cinder King was backed into a corner. His forces would fight.

Elegy turned toward the sound and growled softly.

"Stay close to me," Zellion said, "and don't lose control. Remember, we aren't here to kill. We're here to survive."

"I just want to fight."

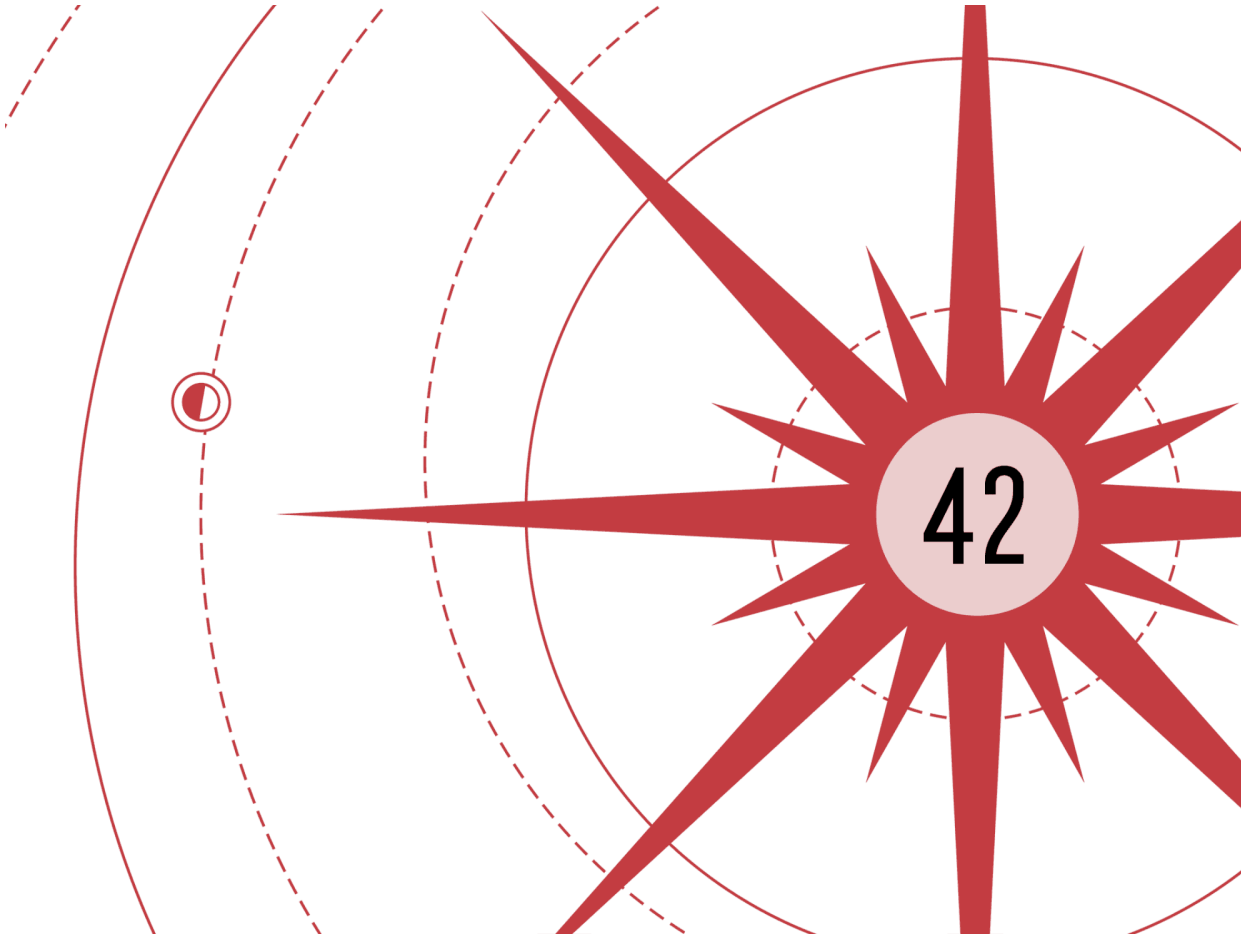
"Fight with *purpose*," he said. "Never forget the why." He raised his empty hand, and a glittering spear appeared in it. He'd been draining away the patina on his soul using the little sunheart, but it was still satisfying how easily he managed to create the weapon.

"Take good care of him," Zellion told Elegy, handing the Shardspear to her.

"Why give it to me?" she said, taking the spear with reverence.

"Because you lack training," he said, "but I still need backup. You'll be far more effective with that than you will be empty-handed, and the fact that it can cut through anything will make up for your inability to thrust with it accurately. Just be careful—don't stab the ship, and do your best not to hit me. Cuts from weapons like that are storming tough to heal."

He nodded to Elegy, who nodded back, eyes alight with eagerness. Together, they burst onto the deck.



ZELLION USED HIS spear to catch the arm of a Charred swinging a machete at his head. He heaved back, then tripped the fellow—but before he could deliver a death blow, Elegy was upon the Charred, stabbing at him repeatedly with her spear. It didn't cut his flesh, but his soul—and when it went into the Charred's brain, his eyes burned and shriveled like coals, his cinderheart going out.

Once he was dead, she kept going, stabbing down through him into the deck itself. Zellion caught her arm, making her pause.

Maybe we should be a little more…reserved with her weapon, eh? I'll try to remember to blunt it if she goes too far.

Zellion looked Elegy in the eyes again. "Be careful."

She nodded, wide eyed, *way* too excited. At least she was enthusiastic.

Only one Charred had made it to their ship; he'd come off a hovercycle, which—unfortunately—had fallen behind after he'd leaped over. It was now vanishing into the distance behind them.

The *Dawnchaser*, the most maneuverable of the Beacon forces, flew a little off from the main formation—which was made up of the four gunships surrounding the small cluster of four densely packed passenger ships.

It was an extremely vulnerable position, something the majority of the Cinder King's pilots seemed to recognize. While their leader and his most elite had flown off in their fastest ships, the rest buzzed around the Beaconites. Fortunately they didn't immediately go for the transports; they took the more obvious option of trying to take out the gunships.

People often aimed for the defenses first, as if there was a kind of hierarchy you were supposed to follow. He wasn't going to complain. Rebeke, following his instructions, swung the *Dawnchaser* in close to Zeal's gunship—which had five Charred swarming its deck. Once close, Zellion jumped. He hit the deck with spear in hand, drawing the attention of the Charred before they could go for the people inside the cab. At Zellion's suggestion, they'd kept the gunships clear of civilians. Just a pilot and copilot in each one.

That left tons of people on the decks of the transports exposed to gunfire and shrapnel. He tried not to think about that as Elegy landed beside him, and they engaged the Charred on the deck of Zeal's gunship. The two of them made a good team—as Zellion proved effective at seizing attention with his flashing spear and tactical strikes. The Charred focused on him, which let Elegy tear through them with the borrowed weapon.

In seconds, four of the Charred were down, and the last one leaped off the deck toward another gunship passing nearby. Zellion nodded to Elegy, who was grinning, and they followed—soaring through the air. As they landed on this second gunship, they met another group of Charred.

These, though, scattered instead of fighting. They surged off the ship to nearby passing enemy vessels.

That was wrong. Very wrong. He knew from his experience with Elegy that Charred preferred to fight, no matter what. They would only run away if directly and forcibly instructed to do so. He glanced to the side and saw small cinderhearts on the deck—perhaps attached with magnets—glowing from the center with wiring and casing around them.

He grabbed Elegy by instinct and threw her toward the *Dawnchaser*, which was sweeping back their direction. He jumped a second later, then the ship behind them—poor people in the cab included—went up in a bright explosion of red fire and burning metal.

Elegy landed on the *Dawnchaser*, then stumbled, staring down at the wreck as it plowed into the muddy landscape below—then detonated again, the shockwave rattling their own ship.

"Cheating," she hissed, her cinderheart pulsing with a white-red anger. "That's *cheating*."

"There are no rules," he said. "We're the ones who brought cannons to the fight."

He felt like a fool, though. He'd known they used explosives. The Beaconites had deployed them effectively in their initial raid to save their friends. He should have prepared for this. The maneuver made sense, as the bombs would work even if Zellion proved too frightening or powerful for the Charred. They didn't need to fight. They just needed to be mobile delivery mechanisms.

"Get back onto Zeal's ship," Zellion shouted, pointing. "Defend it! Don't let any of the Charred linger long enough to plant more bombs. If they do, toss the bombs overboard."

She nodded as he waved for Rebeke to steer them that direction. Elegy jumped across to that deck, and Zellion pointed forward—to where Charred were dropping off of an enemy ship to the deck of the third of the four gunships.

Rebeke pushed them forward, and he leaped, using the momentum to carry him through the rushing air to land on the ship. A Charred here was charging something against her cinderheart—one of the bombs. It seemed they needed to be primed, which gave him a few moments to break through the others and stab her through the neck.

His weapon wasn't Invested, though. Just a common spear. Shockingly she *survived* that hit, forcing him to slap her hand and kick the bomb over

the side. The explosion rocked the ship as he sparred with three other Charred. At least the one he'd stabbed seemed to have trouble fighting. She could barely keep to her feet.

Thinking of that, he focused on the feet and legs of the Charred. He got in a few stabs, then grabbed the railing and motioned in a circle. The pilot, a woman he didn't know well, got the idea and rolled the ship—sending a bunch of wounded Charred screaming into the mud below while Zellion hung on.

A quick glance told him that Elegy was holding her own on the deck of Zeal's gunship. Aux was extremely effective against enemies who were used to being able to rush in and dominate the fight, unconcerned about whether they might take a hit or two. A weapon that cut through metal and severed souls was an excellent way to punish the overly aggressive.

Elegy finished off the Charred who tried to stop her, then kicked two bombs over the side—they didn't detonate, but instead fell mutely to the mud.

Unfortunately that only protected two of the gunships. One was down. Elegy was on one deck. He was on the third. And the last…

He felt the shock wave as a blast went off nearby. He spun and found the final gunship—piloted by Jeffrey Jeffrey—struggling to stay in the air. It had a gaping hole in one side, where—in the strange way of the cinderhearts of this place—the steel itself continued to smolder. Judging by the way the ship was floundering, it was as good as down—especially as he saw three more Charred affixing bombs to various portions of the deck.

So that was two gunships down. And…

No. Not down yet. That ship *was* dead. But people were still alive on board.

This time, he didn't need prompting from Auxiliary. He didn't think further; he ran to the edge of his ship and leaped. A moment of rushing wind followed, then he hit the deck of the fourth gunship hard—as it had been approaching too quickly—losing his spear in the roll. He was thrown to the side as the ship rocked.

With a cry, he summoned Auxiliary as a grappling hook and sank it into the deck, holding himself in place. Hopefully Elegy would be able to survive for a short time unarmed.

Wind roaring around him, ship trembling, he surged to his feet and—ignoring the Charred who were charging their bombs—bounded for the cab

of the ship. Inside, he could see only Jeffrey Jeffrey, trying frantically to control the ship.

Zellion summoned Auxiliary as a full-sized Shardblade, as long as a man was tall, then used it to *slice* off the top of the ship's cab like he was opening a can of food. He saw no sign of the copilot; perhaps they'd been thrown free. Zellion pulled himself up over the lip and reached down, grabbing a confused Jeffrey Jeffrey by the coat. Auxiliary sliced the man's restraining belt free, then Zellion grabbed him with both hands and heaved him out.

He looked back as the Charred leaped free of the ship, falling to the mud below, as other ships were too far to reach. Zellion eyed the blinking bombs, then summoned Auxiliary once more. As a shield. On top of one of the bombs.

Zellion jumped onto it as the bomb detonated.

He and Jeffrey Jeffrey were thrown into the air. Zellion caught sight of a flash of color and metal in the chaos, and swung. When everything settled, he hung by one arm from a set of claw hooks he'd formed from Auxiliary, which he'd rammed into the hull of the *Dawnchaser*. He held Jeffrey Jeffrey by one arm beneath him, dangling above a drop of some twenty or thirty feet.

Looks like he's got a few broken ribs, the knight observes. Severe whiplash. Some nasty bruises waiting to form all along his right side, maybe a concussion.

But he was alive. Zellion hauled him up and tossed him onto the deck of the *Dawnchaser*. Zellion followed, stumbling up onto the deck. On a nearby ship, Elegy was facing several Charred on her own. He shouted to her, then formed Auxiliary into the shape of a metal ball, easy to throw. He hurled it to her, and she caught it. Aux formed into a machete in her hand.

Zellion turned back to Jeffrey Jeffrey, dazed on the deck. The bearded man looked up, eyes wide, trembling. "Why…" he said. "Why is the light breaking around you?"

Zellion glanced to the side. More fragments hung in the air around him in an arch. Three others glowed on his arms, remnants of a different kind of spren. All were reflections of light in the air, making it seem distorted. Maybe…ten of them? Almost like old times. The remnants of two orders, and the oaths he'd left behind.

Nomad smiled and gestured for Jeffrey Jeffrey to make his way into the cab of the *Dawnchaser*, which the man did, limping. Zellion prepared himself for the next fight, raising his fists, ready to go hand to hand.

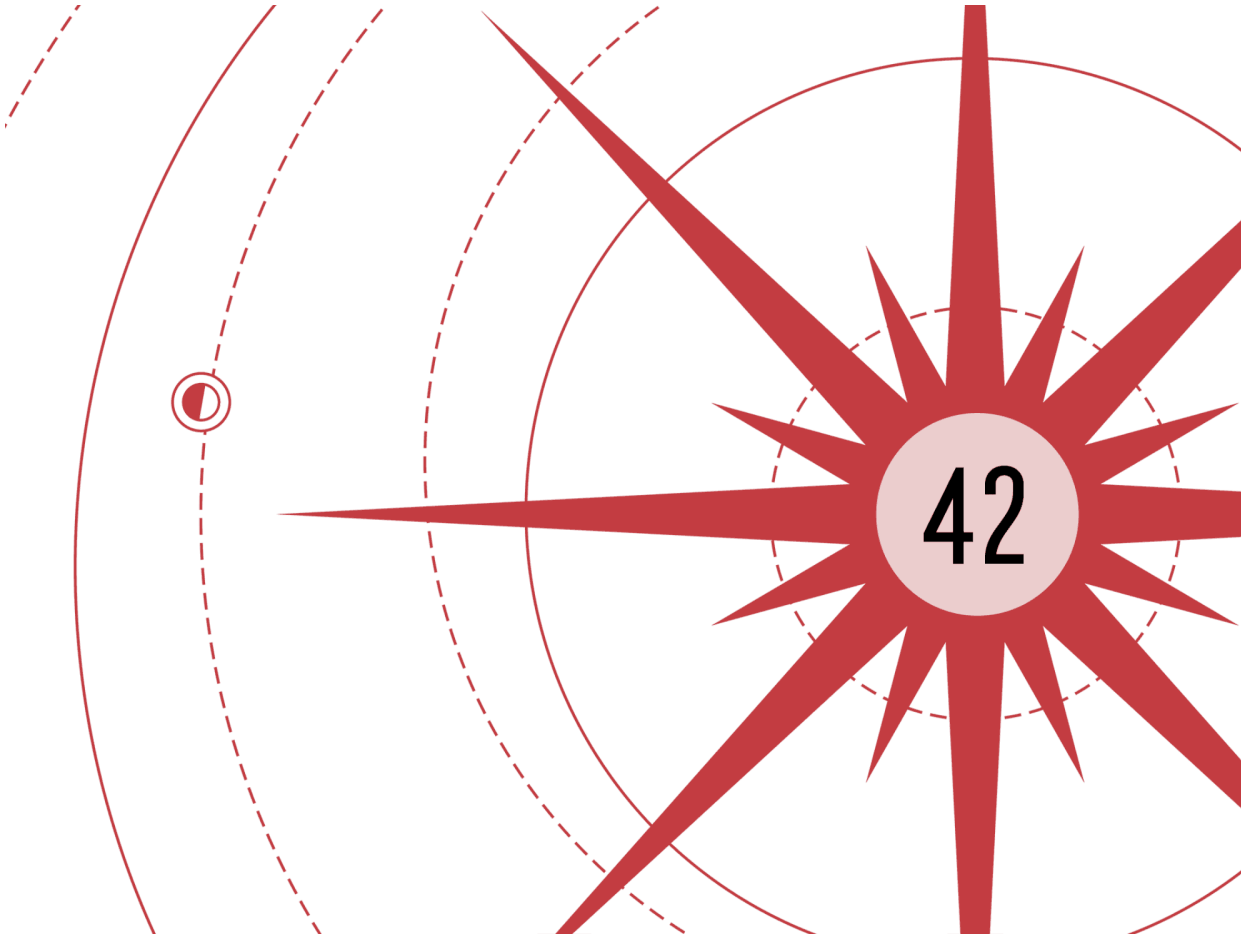
But the enemy forces were falling back for some reason.

There, the knight says. Look, faithful squire. Ships have landed ahead of us.

The Cinder King's entourage. They'd circled a spot on the ground, and had sharpshooters on the decks with rifles pointed skyward. Zellion nodded through the windshield to Rebeke, who took their ship out of the formation and flew it down to do a quick scan. Blasts of rifle fire took bits off the railing and made dents in the hull, but didn't penetrate the thicker armor of Elegy's vessel.

Rebeke surveyed the spot, then met his eyes through the glass. She nodded once, firmly. The ship's prospector scanners had identified a large power source below—as he'd hoped, the Cinder King had led them straight to the Refuge.

It was time to see what was inside.



ELEGY GOT THE SENSE that the battle, in its current form, was finished. The enemy ships were pulling back, and the *Dawnchaser* had finished its low-level sweep and determined they were in the right location. Now it seemed like a standoff between the Beaconites in the air and the Cinder King's forces below.

She felt…fear. Not the blinding, sudden, debilitating fear of hands around your neck. The creeping, pernicious, omnipresent dread that things were slipping out of your control.

That wasn't her emotion. It was the Cinder King's. *Her* own emotions were still aflame. A fire that urged her to find another enemy, to keep swinging this magnificent machete that killed without wounding. To never stop moving, never stop attacking. Never. Stop.

But there was nobody else to kill, and she held herself back—with effort—from entering the cab of her ship and seeking a confrontation with the

person piloting it. Instead, as the *Dawnchaser* swept close, she vaulted over the span between the two ships and grabbed hold of the railing.

Moments later, she pushed into the cab, where the woman Rebeke was at the controls. Elegy clutched her magical weapon. But she did *not* need to use it. The man, the killer, had explained. She could choose her moments. She could make them all the sweeter for having held back.

Rebeke turned—then smiled at her. A genuine smile, it seemed. She was *glad* to see Elegy. Granted, she'd acted that way before—but following the energizing thrill of the killing, knowing that in the back of her mind she'd been contemplating attacking Rebeke… It was such an incongruous thing to see an inviting smile.

She wants me to be here with her, Elegy thought. *What is wrong with her?*

It was disarming. Intriguing. Even…inspiring?

"Elegy," Rebeke said, cocking her head. "Are you well?"

"I…feel different."

"You're remembering," Rebeke said, grabbing her hand. "It's going to happen. You'll remember everything soon."

"Are you not," Elegy said, "supposed to be piloting?"

"Right!" Rebeke said, spinning toward her seat. She did something with the radio, and the killer's voice came on, speaking from one of the gunships.

"All right," he said. "Everyone be ready to swing down into the space I make for us."

"They're entrenched there," Confidence replied. "How are you going to make space for us? They'll shoot us if we land."

"You people…" the killer said, his voice…grumpy? That didn't seem an appropriate word for a man of his ferocity, so perhaps she did not understand emotions as well as she thought. "You spend your lives flying. How can you be so ignorant of the power of air superiority? I guess if you never go to war, and rarely stay in one place long… Well, just watch."

Elegy leaned forward and watched through the windshield as one of the gunships broke out of their formation. It swung around, then dipped, so its large anti-ship guns were pointed at an angle toward the ground. Then it swooped past the Cinder King's position, firing.

Turned out, being on the ground—and therefore immobile—when someone *else* had a ship with that kind of firepower was exciting. The type of excitement that most people didn't like. The type that involved ships exploding, people screaming and jumping out of the way. The killer was able

to stay out of range and drop his shots with gravity—and while he could come in at full speed, they had to just sit there.

In moments, the Cinder King and his forces were scattered. Elegy nodded. It was an effective way to kill, but far too distant and unengaging for her taste. She'd have enjoyed being among those being shot at, perhaps. So much energy and alarm there.

Wait. No. That might get her killed. She was supposed to want to avoid that. After all, who would make certain Rebeke smiled if Elegy died?

A conundrum.

"That was certainly impressive," Confidence said over the radio. "But I offer this warning: if we land there, won't *they* have your 'air superiority' over us?"

"Yup," the killer said. "Which is why I suggest we be quick about this next part. Everyone land and be ready to run for shelter. This is what we've been waiting for. It's time to open that door."

While everyone else did as he asked, Rebeke swooped in and—using a screen on the ship that told her where to look—activated the dirt movers on the *Dawnchaser*. Elegy left her to it, scrambling out onto the deck and jumping the twenty or so feet to the soft ground.

By the time the others had landed and gathered, Rebeke had uncovered something. A large metallic disc set into the ground, only about two feet under the ashen lava soil. Rebeke landed her ship and joined the group huddled around the disc.

The killer stopped at the edge of it, and Zeal joined him, handing up the smaller disc they'd all talked about as being some sort of key. The killer took this, looked it over, then tossed it back to Zeal before hopping down the several feet to land on the surface of the silvery thing.

There, he leaned forward and spoke in a loud voice. "Under the Refugee and Lost Expatriate Bill of Silverlight Codes of Interplanetary Conduct, I formally request asylum in this facility. Please respond."

Silence. Why wasn't he using the key? Elegy understood all those words, but the context eluded her. Instead she looked to the sky, where the Cinder King's forces—looking even more intimidating—were gathering around them.

Suddenly a cylindrical pole, maybe four feet tall, shot up from the metal below, emerging near the killer. A voice spoke from it, heavily accented, but in their language. "Wait. Are you Rosharan?"

"I am," the killer said. "I seek asylum under the—"

“Yes, yes. Fine. You can negotiate.”

“These will need protection while we discuss,” he said, gesturing to the others.

Silence. Elegy watched the sky, trying to feel the fear the others obviously did from their postures. It was difficult for her because the Cinder King was no longer afraid. He thought he had them.

Then a blast of energy ripped up from beneath the earth, shooting right across the Cinder King’s bow. The ships pulled back in a panic. Since when did the *ground* shoot? It was a deliberate message: stay back.

“Fine,” the accented voice said from the pole. “You may bring three people, Rosharan. We’re only listening, mind you, because we’re curious how you got here.”

Another column rose beside the pole, this one much larger, and a door opened on the front. Some kind of…transport device? To carry them down into the Refuge?

“I assume I should bring the Greater Good?” he asked, turning toward the gathering townspeople.

“Bring Rebeke in my place,” Compassion said from her chair, which her grandsons set down on the earth for her. “We should not send all three. Just in case. As you taught us.”

The killer and Rebeke shared a glance, and he nodded, then paused, looking to Elegy. “I’ll need that back.”

Right. She still had the sword. She’d been clinging to it, but forced herself to extend it toward him. The weapon vanished from her fingers, turning to glowing mist, before she could deliver it.

The killer stepped closer, speaking softly. “You might be the only one these people have after this.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If the next part goes poorly,” he said, “try to protect them. I guess that’s all I can ask.”

“Poorly?” she asked, cocking her head. “Why would it go poorly?”

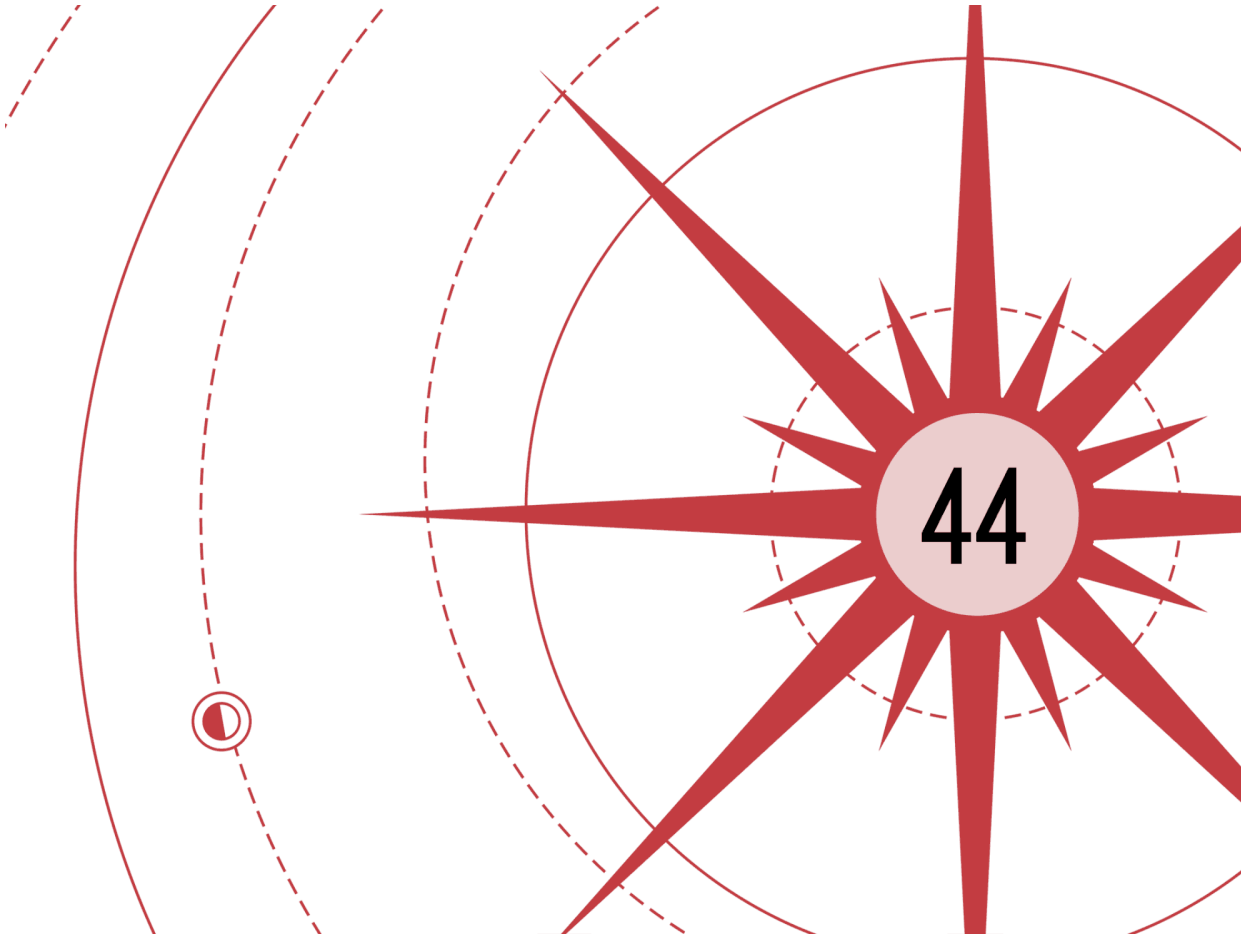
He just gave her a grim look. And that, she knew how to interpret perfectly. A battle was coming. For him.

“You’re going to fight the people who live in the Refuge?” she whispered.

“Not physically,” he said. “Which is unfortunate. Because I’m pretty sure I could win, if that were the case.”

Leaving her with that cryptic statement, he entered the metal tube, joined by Confidence, Contemplation, and Rebeke.

A second later, the tube descended, taking them to the place of safety.



THE DOOR OPENED, and Zellion saw exactly what he'd feared. A large room, capsule shaped, with workstations set through it and monitors on the walls. There would be two more levels beneath this, one for activities, one for quarters. It was big enough for the two dozen people who crewed it—but it was *no* giant sanctuary.

Beside Zellion, the three Beaconites regarded their surroundings with wide eyes, stunned, maybe amazed. They were a technologically advanced people, yes, but they obviously hadn't seen anything like this before.

It was, indeed, a spaceship. A science vessel. Embedded in the ground of this planet to hide and protect it while the scientists took readings. They could *maybe* take in a hundred and thirty or so refugees. But it would pack the place to the walls, strain their life support.

But…maybe there was another way.

Two people, a man and a woman, stepped up to meet him. They wore small metal ornaments at the sides of their faces, triangular, with red enamel.

These were TimeTellers, one faction among the many Scadrian political movements. Theoretically they were neutral in the current conflicts. A group of scientists, seeking to "understand the various mysteries of the cosmere." And they were absolutely not, of course, an arm of the military working in secret to develop tech that would let Scadrial stay ahead in the increasingly dangerous arms race that currently consumed most of the developed planets.

"Rosharan," the man said in his own tongue. "Can we speak in a civilized language, please? Do you speak Malwish?"

Zellion shook his head, pretending not to understand and hoping they didn't speak any of his native languages. At least he could honestly claim ignorance of Azish, having been forced to overwrite the ability to speak that with the local language.

"Very well," the man said, continuing in the local tongue. He had tan skin and was tall for a Scadrian, even an inch or so taller than Zellion. "Rosharan, have you said the oaths?"

"No," Zellion lied. "I'm a free man. I've got no part in the conflicts. Just want to keep my head down and stay alive."

"Can you fight?"

"I have a Blade."

The two Scadrians shared a look.

"How did you get onto this planet?" the woman asked.

"I came via Shadesmar," he said.

"There's no perpendicularity here."

"Got shoved through by a temporary one," he lied. "I was traveling this way but didn't intend to stop. Now I'm stuck. It was the strangest thing. Don't know if I can even explain it."

"There *are* strange events on this planet," the woman said, folding her arms. Like the man, she wore modern clothing. Black jeans, a lab coat, one of the fancy shirts their space force loved.

"We'll be leaving soon," the man said. "Travel is dangerous these days. We could use someone who can fight. You've done mercenary work, I assume, if you have a Blade?"

Zellion nodded.

"Excellent," the man said, clapping his hands. "You're hired."

"Hired?" Confidence said, finally shaking out of her awed stupor. "But—"

"I'm not interested in a job," Zellion said. "I'm already working for these people. I want to negotiate for you to help them."

“Please, dwellers in the Refuge,” Rebeke said, dropping to her knees. “Please. Let us join you. We are hard workers, with strong souls. We have rejected the Cinder King’s terrible ways and have overcome so much to get to you. *Please*.”

“You? Join us?” the woman said, sounding amused. “We’re basically at capacity as it is. What do you think we are? A charity?”

“Listen,” Zellion said, stepping closer to the two of them. “Have you been watching what’s going on above?”

“We have a few of the locals already,” the man said, “to use as subjects in our research. We could use one or two more, I suppose, but that’s it. Really, what we need are those sunhearts, but we already have a supplier of those.”

“Supplier?” Zellion asked. “How did you…” It clicked. “The Cinder King. Guy with the glowing eyes. He’s been meeting with you?”

“Delivers us things we need now and then,” the woman said. “And we give him little tidbits of technology or knowledge. These people had little idea how to exploit their native Investiture.”

Storms. The Cinder King hadn’t been *trying* to get into this place—he’d accomplished it, likely years ago. That was probably how he’d learned to make Charred, how he got the bracers to control them. He hadn’t been protecting this place because he wanted to escape into it; he had been using it as the secret source of his power.

“Listen,” Zellion said, “that man is a tyrant.”

“And?” the woman said.

“What are their problems to us?” the man said. “You’re a mercenary, Rosharan. You know there are dozens of these little planets scattered around, all with their own backward monarchies and their own stupid ways of doing things. What, you want us to take in everyone who is having a bad day?”

“I…”

The objections were obvious. But he found he couldn’t make them because he’d known all along what would happen here. He’d been *planning* for it to happen. Farther into the room, sitting on a nearby table, was a glowing jar. Dor, they called it. A kind of pure Investiture which he could use to activate another Skip, to escape this world, to run to another planet. Just as he’d hoped. This was why he’d come.

What else had he been expecting?

He’d gotten the Beaconites to the door, then through it. That’s what he’d promised. And they’d known. He’d warned them multiple times.

As words failed him, the others tried. “Please, may we negotiate?” Confidence said. “May we invoke, if not your sense of mercy or justice, your sense of commerce? What can we trade you for our safety?”

The two just gave her amused looks. If the Scadrians had wanted anything from these people, they’d have taken it—they likely used the Cinder King as an intermediary more out of convenience than anything else.

“We don’t need anything,” the man said to the trio of Beaconites. “You may go now; continue your own squabbles. We’re not interested in interfering.”

“You could destroy the Cinder King’s ship,” Zellion said, feeling the need to try once more. “The sun will soon rise. You could take this people in only until the light passes us. You…you could do *something*?”

“You are welcome to stay and take our offer, Rosharan,” the woman said, her attention trailing away. “We’ve heard your plea. That’s all that we’re required to do by interplanetary law. The locals will need to see to their own troubles.”

The man nodded, then gestured toward the elevator, his posture stern. They didn’t look armed, but Zellion knew from experience that groups like this were far from weak, even the scientists. Though he’d said he’d prefer a physical fight earlier, he doubted he could take this entire group. If he even had the heart to try. Which right now…he just didn’t.

“You were right, Zellion,” Rebeke whispered, still kneeling. “You tried to warn us. There is no refuge here.”

“I…” He looked back to them, expecting to see anger and dismay at this betrayal.

Their expressions of resignation hurt even more.

“You tried,” Contemplation said to him with a nod. “You did everything we asked of you and more. Zellion, there is no need for that look of sorrow. This was the direction we’ve been pointed for many rotations.”

“It was a fond dream,” Confidence said, taking Rebeke by the arm and pulling her back. “It’s not a sanctuary at all, is it? These are offworlders, like you?”

“Yes,” Zellion said. “I’m sorry. They’re here to study your sun. This ship isn’t that big.”

“Ship,” Rebeke said. “It’s…a ship.”

He nodded.

That seemed enough to explain it to them. They knew; they had heard. They retreated to the elevator. He wanted to go with them, but he hesitated

before entering.

"What do you think, Aux?" he whispered.

I think, the knight says, that we have gotten exactly what we deserve from this exchange.

Wisely put. He met Contemplation's eyes and knew he wasn't going with them. What point was there in going up to die? He needed to keep running. That was what he *did*.

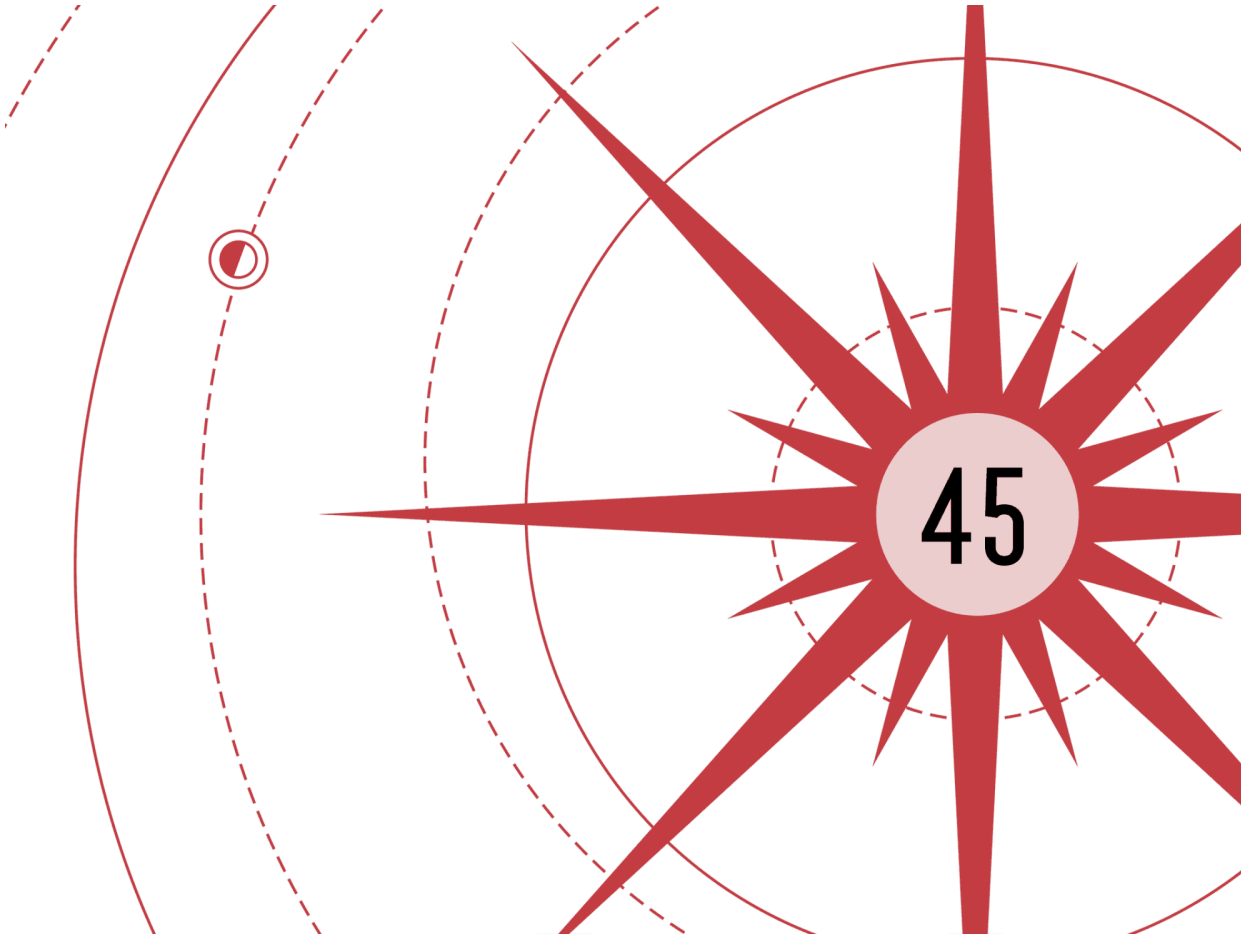
This was why it was better not to get involved. A part of him had been preparing for this all along, had tried to keep a distance between him and them. The realist in him took charge, insisting that it was time to be done.

"Stay," Contemplation said to him in a heartbreakingly soft, caring way. "Stay with your kind."

The door closed, then carried them back up to the surface. On a monitor, Zellion watched the Cinder King's forces creep closer, and this time no blast from beneath rose to frighten them off.

The Beaconites were out of power, out of resources, exhausted, and defeated. It was over.

Zellion…Nomad…sighed, then settled down in a place by the wall, closed his eyes, and—for once—let himself rest.



SITTING WAS TOO easy. And that made it hard.

Head tipped back. Eyes closed. Breathing even. It let Nomad hear the small sounds: the persistent, ubiquitous—yet oft inaudible—sounds of life. Fingers tapping on touchpads. The deep, musical voice of the ship's Awakened Steelmind giving a status report. People chuckling softly—the aftershocks of a joke that had been too quiet for him to hear.

But there was no motion. No place to run, no place to be. In moments like this, when he wasn't solving some problem or scrambling from one disaster to the next, Nomad could hear his own thoughts far too easily.

"Am I a coward, Aux?" he asked.

For being traumatized? I'm not the greatest expert on humans, but I hardly think that's an appropriate way of looking at what has happened to you.

"Even so," he whispered. He could *feel* that jar of pure Investiture on the desk nearby. He'd settled here, just within reach of it—but knew he'd be

watched at first. He hoped his slumped posture, his tired features, his lack of vibrance would put them at ease.

He couldn't steal it yet. Not *quite* yet.

"Report, sir," a voice said halfway across the room. "That ship in orbit earlier? Night Brigade."

Another voice, cursing softly. "Why are they here?"

"No idea. Shall we…ask?"

"No, don't reveal us. Hopefully their purpose is unrelated."

Tensely Nomad waited, wondering if they'd put it together. He listened for the telltale sounds of people turning toward him, of someone making the connection. Mysterious Rosharan mercenary. Night Brigade in orbit.

Nothing. Nomad wasn't surprised; the Night Brigade didn't like people to know why he was important. The Dawnshard was a weapon too valuable to sell. If you knew about it, you either hunted it yourself—or you ran far, far away.

When are you going to go for that power source? the hero asks.

"Not yet. Soon."

"Hey!" a voice said from another part of the room. "That Rosharan was right—this *is* interesting. We should have been watching."

He let his eyes flutter open. A worker sipping tea had turned on one of the large wall screens, displaying an overhead view of the landscape outside. So they *did* have a satellite system in place? Or perhaps drones?

The view zoomed in on the Beaconite ships flying for the shadow with all they had. Which wasn't much. Two gunships down, the last two trying—awkwardly—to dogfight.

"Are those ship-to-ship guns?" a woman asked. "When did they discover those? I thought we were withholding that technology until later."

Nomad stood up, entranced. Maybe…maybe they…

One gunship went down. Another pilot—maybe Zeal—dead. And the rest…even from the distant perspective, he saw Charred dropping from approaching enemy ships onto the transports. He couldn't hear the ultimatum, but he wasn't surprised when the surviving ships executed a landing.

Surrender. The people of Beacon had, at long last, given up.

It was a death sentence. But what choice did they have?

He stumbled against a desk, realizing he'd been walking forward unconsciously, hands making fists. Was this really who he was? The man

who ran *away*? Was that what he'd been trained to be? Was that who he *wanted* to be?

He couldn't help it. He whispered the words, the old words of his oaths.

Nothing happened.

He slunk back to his wall, where he dropped to sit, then huddled down, cheek to the floor. Exhausted.

Wait, Auxiliary said. *Wait. I thought that would work. I thought…if you wanted it back…*

"You wanted a revelation in light." Nomad squeezed his eyes shut.

Well, yes. Why…

"Consequences," he whispered. "I walked away from my oaths. I made the decision. And now…now there are consequences."

Why, though? You've never told me why you walked away after leaving Roshar. After all we'd been through together. You abandoned all you'd followed. Why would you do that?

Was it time? Time for the deepest, hardest truth—the answer that felt like teeth on pavement to acknowledge?

"I don't know," he said.

Liar.

"Not this time," Nomad whispered. "I *don't know*, Auxiliary. I just…did it. I can't explain my mindset. I can't justify it. I disavowed my oaths. It's the choice I made. But I didn't have a reason."

You have to. Everything has a reason.

Here was why he'd never tried to explain. For all his apparent humanity, Auxiliary was a creature of Investiture. Immortal. Slow to change.

Nomad huddled down further, pulling into a ball against the cold steel as he heard others in the room discussing the Cinder King's capture of the rogue city. He heard them noting how ominous it must feel to have an entire *city* descend upon you. Union had arrived.

Nomad… Sigzil. I don't understand.

"Humans," Nomad whispered, "are…inconsistent sometimes. We do what we feel. We can't explain it. I look back on the choice I made, and it feels entirely unlike me. But I did it; *I* made the choice. In the heat of a moment.

"It doesn't matter if it's what I wanted to do or what—logically—I should have done. The consequences stand. This…this is who I am."

He couldn't go back. He had to move forward. Keep going. He'd gotten *so good* at staying ahead, at moving, at…at running.

Why, then, was he in the *exact same place*?

He put his hands to his skull, digging his fingers into the skin. How could he run so hard and never get anywhere? The journey was supposed to be the important part, wasn't it?

Why, then, was he so miserable?

Part of him wanted to burst out of this place and go looking for the Beaconites, but what good was that? He couldn't make a home for them, a safe place. And if he got caught by the Night Brigade, it could mean the deaths of millions.

He had no answers. He didn't know his destination. Maybe that was why he was so lost. Hard to be anything else if you didn't know where you were going.

It wasn't a revelation in light. More, one in tears.

The room had fallen silent. He forcibly ripped himself away from his self-loathing, looking up long enough to see why. The Scadrians had mostly turned to watch the screen with the Beaconites, where the Charred were *retreating* toward Union—the massive city hovering in the near distance. At first, hope sparked—but like an ember from a fire released into the cold, hungry night, that hope died immediately.

The Charred had taken the sunhearts from Beacon's ships. They were leaving the people alone in the growing grass. Lit by too much light. The sun, never resting, was close to rising again. The Cinder King was going to leave the *entire town's* worth of people as offerings. Nearly one hundred and thirty-five souls.

The brutality of it was minimal on the grand scale; Nomad had just been thinking of the deaths of millions, the fall of planets. Yet there was a terrible *personal* cruelty to this event. Even the Scadrians picked up on it, every single one of them staring at the screen in silence. The postures of the Beaconites, falling to their knees in sorrow and terror. The abject abandonment of Union cruising away, leaving them behind, deaf to their pleas.

The Cinder King certainly had learned his lessons in tyranny well. Granted, that wasn't the sort of thing humans needed mentoring in. Too many of them could intuit how to be terrible all on their own. He'd been there himself.

Soon the screen had drawn the attention of everyone in the room except the most focused workers. An opportunity. The glowing Investiture Cell was right within Nomad's reach. He stood up, and nobody glanced his way.

He could take it and be gone in a moment.

He didn't.

He…he couldn't.

Are…we going to do anything? the knight asks his faithful squire.

"Yes," Nomad said. "We're going to watch and witness."

The words drew the attention of a nearby scientist—a woman with a ponytail who had been too interested in her work on a pair of sunhearts to be distracted by the screen. But she found him interesting enough, apparently.

"Who were you talking to?" the woman asked him, narrowing her eyes. "I thought you said you were unoathed. Do you have a spren?"

Damnation. He'd grown careless. These people could see the signs he hadn't needed to hide from the Beaconites.

"Just an old habit," he said. "It's nothing. What are you doing there? Are you transferring Investiture between two different sunhearts?"

"Yes!" she said, sitting back, displaying the age-old joy of a scientist who was pleased to find someone who actually cared about her work. "We recharged this one earlier. We're studying how much we can stuff into a single sunheart."

Recharged.

"You *recharged* a sunheart?" he asked, numb.

"Well, of course. Using that sunlight."

"The people have tried that," he said. "They told me. Leaving out a used sunheart doesn't do anything…" He stood up straighter. "Wait. It has to do with the strange current of this world, doesn't it? The way the core of the planet draws Investiture and heat from the sun? Sucking it down, like it's creating an electric circuit?"

"Yes!" the woman said, looking at him more closely. "How did you know? That took us *months* to figure out."

"The sunhearts don't recharge normally…" he said. "But the ground melts. People go aflame. Anything trapped *between* the sun and the core is like…like interference between two opposite electric poles." He looked upward at the lights in the ceiling. Modern ones, but reminiscent of those from long ago.

"An incandescent bulb," he whispered. "I thought of it earlier. It glows when current passes through the filament—but not because the filament is good at conducting. Rather the opposite. That filament *resists* and loses energy as heat and light. Radiating it. That's what makes a light bulb work.

"Normal sunhearts…the Investiture just passes through them, doesn't it? That's why nothing happens if you leave a used one buried. But when

they're formed in the first place, it's because a soul is resisting—causing the Investiture there to flare. Like the light of a light bulb. That's what captures all that power and leaves behind a sunheart."

The woman folded her arms on the table. "Yes," she said. "Have you been intercepting our communications? Is that why you know this?"

"How do you do it?" he asked, ignoring her question. "How do you recharge them? Wait. You put something else into them, something to be burned away by the sunlight? That temporarily blocks the circuit—or offers resistance to it."

"Some heat from a local works," she said, studying him. "We have a few captives. They prime the sunhearts with a little of their heat, then we leave the sunhearts out. It works. Use some special Investiture instead, and you get a corrupted cinderheart to make the Charred."

Storms, that made sense. It was a simple answer to recharging the sunhearts, but one that would take either happenstance or a deep understanding of Investiture to try. No wonder the people of Canticle had never discovered it.

"Are you an arcanist?" the woman asked, her frown deepening.

"Nothing so grand," he said, staring at her powerfully glowing sunheart, charged far beyond its regular capacity. "You realize this solves most of their problems, right?"

"Making Charred?"

"No, the first part! If the people out on the surface knew, they could recharge their power sources endlessly. No more sacrifices. Just a little bleeding of their warmth to prime depleted sunhearts, then bury them and return to find them glowing again!"

The researcher shrugged. "I suppose."

"Storms!" Nomad said, hand to his forehead. "Why didn't you *tell* them?"

"Why would we reveal such a useful secret?"

He had to do something. He had to *tell* them.

The air broke around him—the fragments of his ancient armor trying to push into reality again. Some from his first oaths, some from his second. Either way, it was the absolute *wrong* time for them to be doing that.

"Oathed after all…" the woman said, noting the shards. "Arcanist… Rosharan… Dark skin…" Her eyes went wide.

Damnation.

Nomad lunged for the Investiture Cell, but she snatched it off the table and backed away, raising a hand and tapping the metal device on her glove.

Instead he snatched the sunheart she'd been working on, the one they'd overcharged.

Fortunately he didn't have any metal on him, so—

He was thrown violently backward, Pushed by something at his waist. His metal belt buckle. Right.

He slammed into the wall.

"We have a problem!" the researcher shouted to the rest of the room. "I've read about this man! *He's* why the Night Brigade is here! Rusts, there's a bounty on his head big enough to buy a small *planet*."

The other Scadrians spun, looking away from the sad sight of the Beaconites—who had gathered in a huddle amid their fallen and powerless ships—as the sunrise loomed. Nomad ripped off his belt before it could be used against him again, then he summoned Auxiliary in his flashiest form: the enormous, six-and-a-half-foot Blade, wavy, with ornamentation near the hilt.

Most people had never seen a Shardblade in person, but they'd heard the stories. Even a group like this—who could have overwhelmed him with their technology—froze at the sight of it.

"I'm leaving," he told them, voice harsh. "You get to choose. You can stand in my way. Or you can continue to breathe."

"Leaving?" one of the Scadrian leaders said. "It's less than five minutes to sunrise, idiot."

Five minutes from us? Auxiliary said. *Then the Beaconites have a good fifteen before it reaches them, as they flew a short distance before being downed. We can work with that.*

Nomad backed up to the elevator, enormous sword in one hand, sunheart in the other. "Operate it," he said to them.

Nobody moved.

"Operate it," he said, "or I will *cut my way out*."

"You'd destroy the integrity of the hull!" a woman cried. "We'd be killed by the—"

"Then don't make me do it!"

Storms. What was he doing?

He didn't have an explanation. That's how people were sometimes.

The door to the elevator opened. He stepped inside, dismissing Auxiliary —as in this shape, he was big enough to be awkward. The elevator worked, though, and the Scadrians didn't try anything. It spit him out onto a

landscape that had changed dramatically in the minutes since he'd left, an entire forest of spindly trees growing up from the mud.

Nomad—Zellion—looked through them toward the building sunlight. Storms. They'd said under five minutes, but he doubted he had that long. He turned and started running.

It's what he did. It had always been enough before. This time, he'd rounded the entire planet, but found himself where he'd begun.

Sunlight rising. He felt it on his back. The trees around him started wilting. Withering.

You can't outrun it, Auxiliary said. Was that…soft nuance to his voice? It had been years since Zellion had heard that. *Even you can't outrun that light.*

He kept trying, sunheart clutched to his chest.

Zellion, Auxiliary said, *you'll need to fly to reach them.*

"I can't!" he shouted. "I…I can't, Aux. I've *tried*."

The sunlight grew more oppressive. Trees darkened, smoldering.

Zellion kept running.

You're a better man than you pretend to be, Auxiliary said. *Even still. Even broken as you are.*

"I'm just a fool. A callous fool."

We both know that isn't true. Because the smart thing to do, the callous thing, would have been to attack Beacon the moment you got to it. Steal their sunhearts, leave their ships stranded. You didn't do that.

No. He hadn't. Because whatever he said, he was still a man, not a monster.

Zellion. My friend. You're worth saving.

He started crying as he ran.

When you reach them, Auxiliary said, *make sure they know the secret. Make sure you save them, Zellion.*

"But—"

Listen to me. Just listen. I can give you a little burst of power, like we discussed.

"No! I'll use the power from this sunheart."

And will that make you fly again?

No, it wouldn't. Because it wasn't power he lacked. It was something else.

I will make you what you were. For a short time. I am the leftover strength of oaths sworn. I am the truth you once knew. Take it again, for the briefest time, and soar.

He felt warmth begin to spread through him. It was a different kind of Investiture…drawn from the remnant of *Auxiliary's soul*.

I will burn away only myself, Auxiliary said. *My personality. That should leave you with my body, the weapon, to still use. This is my destination, but not yours.*

"You can't do this, Aux. Please."

You don't get to decide. I know about consequences. I understand that you betrayed your oaths.

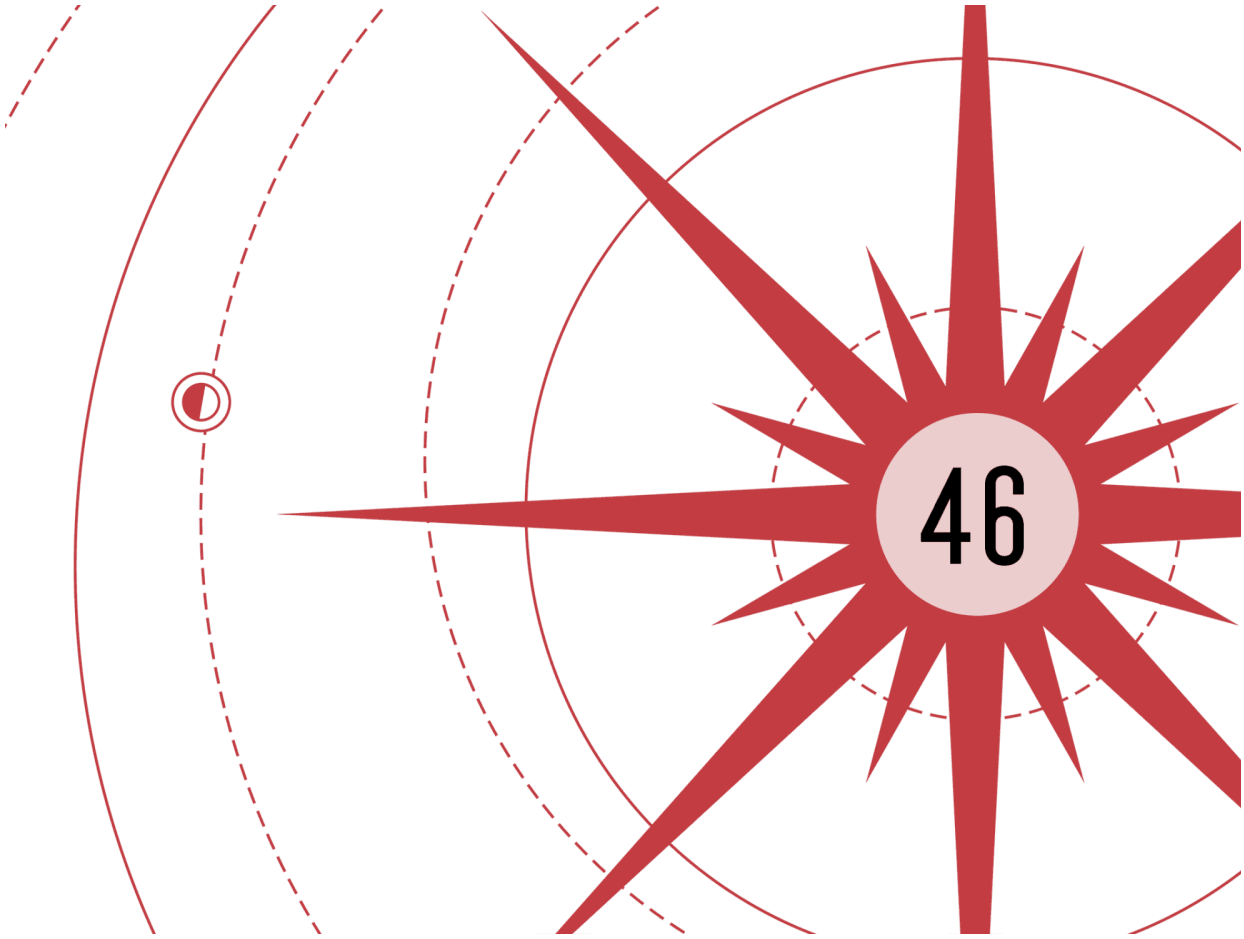
But here's the thing, Zellion. Here's what you never have understood. I also swore to be better than I was. I became a Knight Radiant. I spoke the words.

And whatever you did, I never betrayed my *oaths.*

You protect those people, Zellion. I've carried you as far as I can. You'll have to find the rest of the way on your own.

An awesome, familiar power welled up inside him. As the sun finally broke the horizon—causing the forest to burst into flame—armor formed around Zellion.

And his eyes came alight.



ELEGY WALKED AFTER the Cinder King as he stepped to the edge of Union, flying in an imperious way above the landscape, watching over the fallen people of Beacon.

Several men in white coats dragged Rebeke over as well. She was the only person of Beacon other than Elegy that the Charred had recovered. Elegy hadn't initially been certain why he'd picked Rebeke to spare. Now, however, she could feel his emotions, and she understood. He *boiled* with satisfaction. With the thrill of having such power over so many people.

His cinderheart glowed fiercely beneath his shirt, and he smiled with unbridled glee at the horror in Rebeke's expression. She fell to her knees at the side of the flying city, looking down at the huddled remnants of Beacon, gathered on the ground. Fewer than one hundred and thirty-five souls, surrounding the ruins of their once proud, rebellious town.

Yes, that was it. He was happy to have a deliberate kind of power over Elegy's family line, and its last living member.

In the distance, the sun rose. Light moved across the land as a sheet of flame.

Elegy stood with six other Charred. She was too new to understanding people to know for certain, but she thought that maybe she'd fooled the Cinder King. When the Beaconites had decided to surrender, she'd made a good show of lashing out at them too—in full sight of the other Charred who came to secure the place. They'd delivered her up to the Cinder King, who had touched her cinderheart with his fingers and spoken some words.

That hadn't done anything, but she'd pretended it had. She'd calmed, because she could still feel what he *wanted* of her, even if she didn't have to *do* it. She'd felt his pleasure at her immediate obedience, and she now stood quietly—as if completely under his control.

They hadn't searched her. Why would they?

So they didn't know about the sliver of a sunheart that Zellion had given her. She wouldn't, it turned out, need it for herself.

Rebeke knelt at the edge of the city, shaking. Elegy continued to find her weakness curious. Before being taken as a Charred, had Elegy been similarly fragile? Though she would not say it aloud, she was glad for what had been done to her. For the strength she now had.

"Please," Rebeke said, turning a tear-streaked face toward the Cinder King. "There's no need to do this. They can serve you well, great king."

"They *will* serve me," he said, oozing with self-satisfaction. "Your people will be the flames that carry my ships to conquer and unite even the farthest corridors. Once the other towns know the price of rebellion—once my people spread word of an entire city fallen to the sun—all will shrink and cower before me." He nodded, speaking as if only to himself. "This is how I will unify the world."

Rebeke slumped. Then curiously something changed about her posture. The Cinder King wasn't watching, but Elegy saw it. Saw the younger woman's hands ball to fists, her chin rise. She was going to attack him, wasn't she? Elegy nodded in approval. Though the act would be futile, it was bold. A better way to die.

Strangely, instead of attacking, Rebeke *spoke*.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Confusion from the Cinder King—Elegy could feel it.

"Know?" he asked.

"Know that I'd been leading Beacon all this time," she said. Then she pointed down to the rest of her people. The three old women knelt in the

center of the group, deep in prayer before the advancing sunlight. “How did you know those three were puppets, used to distract you? After you took Elegy, we knew we needed to hide what I was. Yet you’ve obviously seen through the ruse.”

“Yes, well,” the Cinder King said. “It was obvious.”

A lie? Why did he care to lie?

He doesn’t want to be seen as ignorant, Elegy realized. How curious. But why was Rebeke lying? What was she hoping to accomplish? Now he’d be *more* likely to kill her, not less.

Rebeke stood up and turned away from the people to meet his eyes. “You’ve made your point, Cinder King,” she said. “You have me, and you know what I am. I have bent before you. Collect the others, and I will tell them that I serve you.”

He paused, cocking his head.

“What’s better?” Rebeke asked. “The world knowing you can kill a city? Please—anyone could take the sunhearts from a group of straggling ships with no warriors. But if the world knew that even your greatest detractor—the leader who sought to overthrow you—eventually realized her power was nothing compared to yours… If they knew even *she* agreed to follow you, then nobody else would ever rebel.”

What was this ruse? Rebeke was no leader; she was weak and soft. Wasn’t she? Yet the Cinder King believed Rebeke’s lies. Elegy could feel it.

And…and Elegy found that she believed them a little herself.

“No,” the Cinder King said.

“Then kill me!” Rebeke said, stepping forward. “Bring the others here and make them watch me die! Think of the power you’ll feel, holding my throat in your hands, crushing the life from me as my people watch. Is that not the ultimate show of strength? Why kill them when you can make them *suffer*?”

Elegy gasped, and then immediately hoped she hadn’t betrayed herself. She couldn’t help it, however, watching Rebeke—short, completely without strength of arm, face streaked with tears—confront the Cinder King and *trick* him. Yes, Elegy could feel how seductive he found the thought of killing her in front of the Beaconites.

Rebeke, safest of them all at the moment, sought to give away her life for the others. She could not fight the Cinder King, but somehow she was close to *defeating* him. If he rescued the others and killed Rebeke…

Shades. Elegy had been wrong.

This wasn't weakness. In this realization, Elegy felt a strange calmness. Something that forced back her desire to rend and move and kill and fight.

This was strength. Rebeke was *stronger* than Elegy was.

The moment held, with the sunlight advancing—slowly but inevitably across the landscape—and Rebeke didn't break. She didn't look back. She committed to her gambit.

Until, at last, the Cinder King smiled.

"You almost," he said to her, "persuaded me. But I can see pain in your eyes. You *hurt* so terribly to know they're going to die. I will not be swayed by you. To do so would give you power over me."

Then she went for him, hands going for his eyes—but one of the Charred caught her before she'd taken a single step. Rebeke struggled, ranting, screaming. Her ploy collapsing. Her frustration boiling out.

Still, it had been a valiant effort. A soldier on a losing battlefield using the only weapon she had left: her life.

"You shouldn't have told me," the Cinder King said, "that you were their leader. I was planning to keep you as a trophy. Now that I know you've been leading the dissenters against me…well, I think you'll make a fine Charred. First, you can watch them die." He stepped closer to her as she struggled in the grip of the Charred. "This is true power. The power over life and death. The…"

He paused. He squinted toward the advancing sunlight.

Elegy followed his gaze, and even his Charred—as always, sensing his emotions—turned to look. The moment caught Rebeke too, who was allowed to twist and search the horizon. What had he seen?

The sunlight was close to the Beaconites—and as it advanced, it set aflame the plants and even the sky: a wave of destruction, fire, and light. Moving slowly by the scale of ships, but still faster than a person could run. The Beaconites should have tried anyway. Instead they huddled together, not wanting to leave stragglers and the young—wanting to die as one, not as a field of running individuals.

In that moment, Elegy could see the strength in that too.

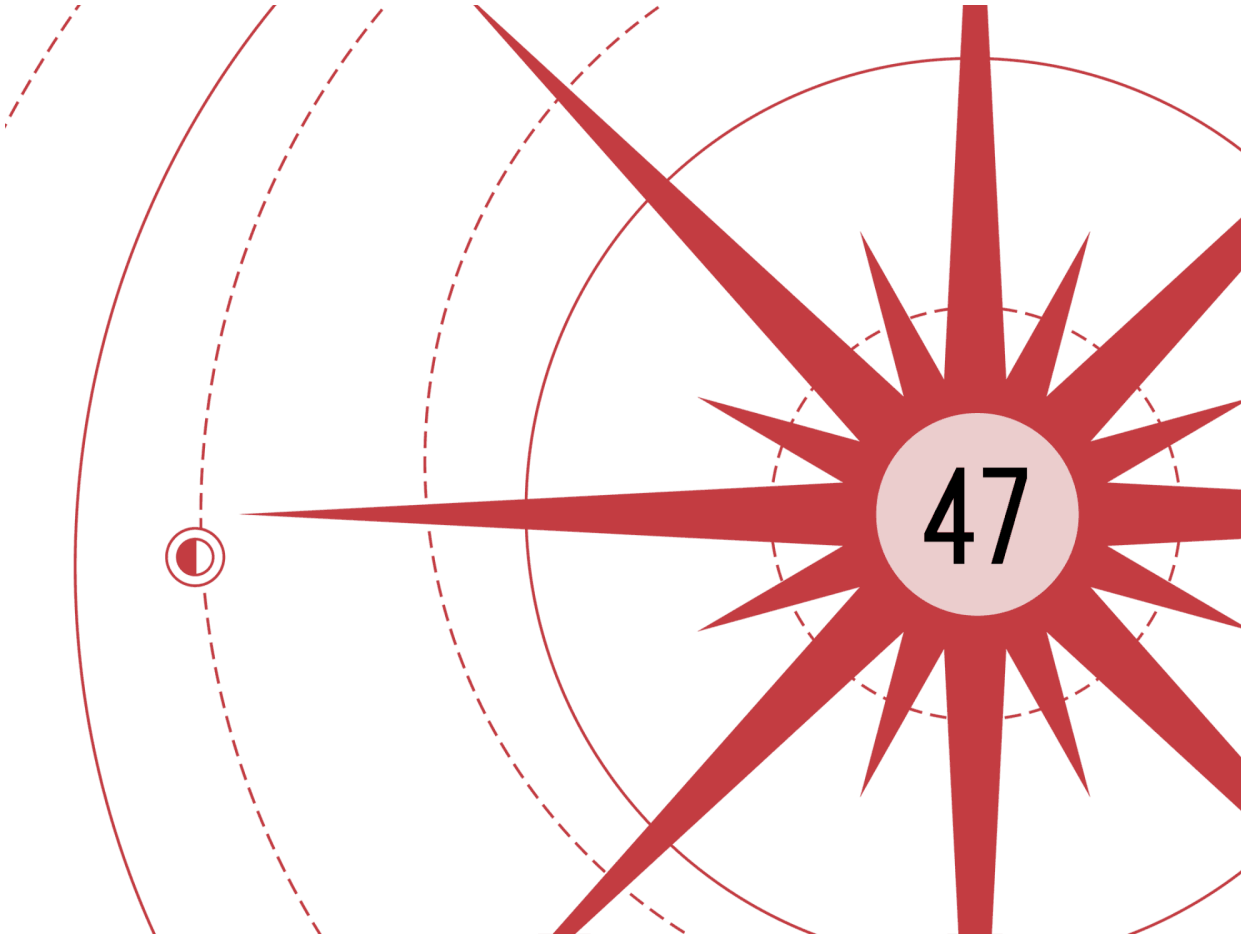
Together, they watched the advancing flames. A sky of red and orange, a brilliant death.

The fire undulated. The sheet of light rippled and changed.

Then a figure, high in the sky, exploded from the light, trailing fragments of fire and smoke, glowing like metal being forged. A living ember of light. Somehow, he'd *lived* through the inferno. Indeed, the very fire in the sky

seemed to arrange itself behind him into the shape of some symbol Elegy did not know. Roughly triangular, point down, with wings extending outward on either side.

"It's him," Rebeke whispered.



AS ZELLION EMERGED from the dawn, he found himself whole and unburned. The suit of armor, designed to maintain temperature and life support for the person it protected, had been able to withstand even the sunlight's terrible heat.

That gave him hope as he directed his flight toward the patch of huddled people who were perilously close to the advancing dawn. He soared, and part of him enjoyed this moment out of his former life, when he'd been a man who had deserved the skies.

But today's cost weighed him down, no matter how high he soared. "Aux," he whispered. "It worked."

There was no response. His companion all these years, the one who had started this journey with him, was dead. Well and truly gone. All Zellion had was Aux's corpse—in the form of a tool and a weapon. Storms, how that crushed him inside.

Zellion's failure was sealed now. Yet, for a moment, he was someone else. Someone who would do everything he could to respect his friend's dying command.

Defend those people.

He landed in an explosion of dirt, hitting with the force of a small meteor, and felt the power that Aux had given him run out. As he'd been warned, only a tiny bit had remained. Barely enough to contain Aux's personality. Dreams, ideas, and honor. Burned away in a moment. Zellion summoned Aux's body as a shield, and that still worked, as hoped.

He jogged through the middle of the crowd of awed people, and dismissed his helm—revealing his face to the chilly open air. Still, he knew—despite his armor being relatively sleek compared to some—he'd look like a hulking monster. They made way for him as he stomped to their perimeter.

"Is Solemnity Divine still here?" he shouted, stopping at the edge of the group, sweat trickling down his neck as he glanced at the sunlight. It was storming close—*again*.

"Zellion?" Solemnity Divine asked, breaking from the crowd. "It's true? You're—"

"Shave off a sliver of that," he said, tossing her the sunheart he'd taken from the Scadrians. "Then get it installed in the *Dawnchaser* and give the rest back to me. *Soon.*"

"Zellion?" Contemplation said, pushing forward, her black dyed locks spilling across her shoulders. "Is that a sunheart? We can fly to safety!"

He shook his head. "You fancy trying to get all these people on ships in the next minute or two? And even if you do, then what? The Cinder King will just stop them again. You're far too vulnerable."

"Then what?" she demanded. "If it pleases you, tell us your plan!"

Solemnity Divine tossed back the rest of the sunheart, then went running to install the sliver as asked. Zellion slotted the sunheart into a place he'd made on the back of the shield.

Please work, he thought. *Please let this be enough. Please.*

Power surged through the shield. Zellion planted it into the ground, then gave the command. It started to grow, expanding into a dome. Not transparent this time, as that would defeat the purpose. A large piece of metal, reflective on the outside. When he'd encased himself in this in the maelstrom, he'd been protected from the bulk of the heat. In this form, Auxiliary's corpse should be able to provide some of the same protections as his armor.

“What…” Contemplation stepped closer to him as the dome continued to grow. “Could it always do this?”

“No,” he said, then tapped the sunheart embedded into it. “It needs Investiture on a grand scale. This is a superpowered sunheart, *recharged* by the people inside the Refuge.”

She stared at it, then at him. “You can *recharge* them?” she whispered. “How?”

“There’s very little time. You know the invocation that takes heat and puts it into a sunheart?”

“Bold one on the threshold of death, take into your sunheart my heat, that I may bless those who still live,” she said. “It’s a prayer.”

“Yes,” he said. “Fill a sunheart with some of your heat as a seed, *then* leave it in the sun. It will respond like a person’s soul, burned away in a flash of power—and that will recharge the sunheart.”

“This means… This changes *everything*.”

“Take it to everyone, Contemplation,” he said. “Tell them this truth and change the world.”

“So simple…” she said. “How did we never see it?”

“Many of the greatest technological advances are simple at their core,” Zellion said.

The shield began to grow to cover the ground, forcing everyone to step up onto it, to protect them from the impending magma below. Storms, he hoped it wouldn’t be so violent that they were tossed about and harmed. There wasn’t much he could do about that right now. He watched the dome near completion, bringing darkness upon them, save for a hole at the far end. He’d leave through that, then seal it.

“We will survive this,” Contemplation whispered. “Thank you. I knew you would come back.”

“That’s odd,” he said, “because I didn’t.”

“Adonalsium did,” she replied. “I prayed to him for this to happen.”

He grimaced, and Contemplation regarded him, their faces visible by the light of the nearby sunheart. His armor was glowing too, though not in either of its customary shades of blue. Instead it glowed with the light of embers—the sunlight might have damaged it, because little flecks of red-orange light continued to burn all across it—and when he moved, he trailed smoke.

“I’ve noticed your expression when we mention Adonalsium.”

“Contemplation,” he said. “I don’t mean to be contrary, but Adonalsium? He—”

“He’s dead?” she asked. “Yes, we know. Did you think we had no idea of the story? The Shattering? The Shards?”

“I…yes. So I assumed. Since you still talk about him and…well, you know, pray.”

“Our faith,” she said, “is that this is all part of some plan. It’s not about everything happening the way we want—but trusting that it *is* happening the way *someone* wants.”

“I find that a little naive.”

“And yet,” the old woman said, “here you are. Saving us.”

“That was because of Auxiliary,” he said. “My shield here, who gave up his last vestige of life so I could come to you in time.”

“And what was Auxiliary?”

“My spren. A…quantum of power, Investiture, come to life.”

“And where did that being come from?”

From…a Shard of Adonalsium. Storms.

Well, a part of him still believed in Yaezir and the emperor, despite all that had happened. He told himself that he’d never seen them as infallible, and that was the difference that kept him from being a blind zealot compared to many religious people he met. But then, that might just be rationalization.

He nodded to Contemplation as the dome’s floor finished near his exit.

“They took Rebeke,” Contemplation said. “And Elegy.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” Contemplation said. “I know you don’t want the title I tried to give you. But today you came to us when we needed it most. By choice. Thank you, Zellion. Sunlit Man.”

“It is time to start moving forward again,” he said, standing up straight. “Teach everyone how to recharge sunhearts. Make sure the news spreads.”

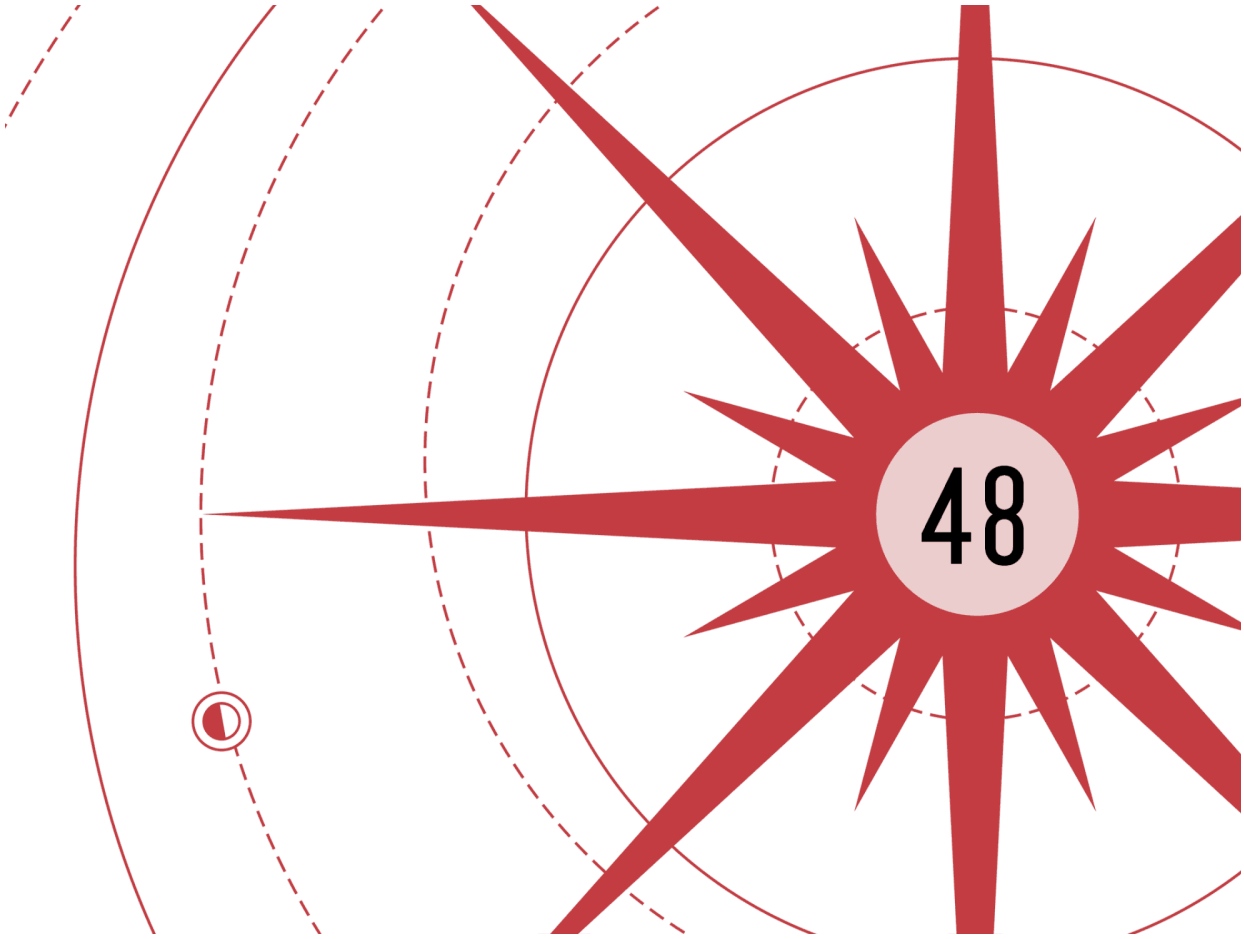
“We will,” she said. “Unless the Cinder King stops us.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Zellion said. “I’ll deal with him.”

He took off running for the ship as Solemnity Divine flew it over for him. A few moments later, he zipped out—leaving the dome sealed behind him, hoping it would maintain life support inside—and flew toward Union.

Sunlight enveloped the dome, respecting Auxiliary’s last wish as he literally became the wall that held back destruction from the Beaconites. There was nothing else Zellion could do for them directly, but they did still need him. Not for salvation, but for something he knew far more intimately.

Killing.



ELEGY HELPED AS the Charred pulled the weapon into place. A large gun, taken from one of the Beaconite ships for the Cinder King's engineers to study. Instead they now settled the huge weapon down on the rim of his floating city, and a few engineers buzzed about, powering it with a sunheart.

The Cinder King barked in annoyance at them as he climbed up beside the weapon, taking a control device from a nearby official. The engineers were mostly worried about recoil, and had piled a great deal of cushioning behind the weapon—which was wedged against a wall. From the way they spoke, Elegy was hoping she'd get to see the Cinder King thrown overboard as it shook. Perhaps he would get mashed beneath it, which would be amusing.

Sadly the gun fired without difficulty—delivering a ball of glowing energy into the distant dome. It bounced off, but it proved that the system worked. He had them move it to point at Zellion's approaching ship.

Elegy felt a surge of excitement. She'd hoped for something like this.

She shot Rebeke, held captive by a nearby Charred, a grin. Rebeke, in turn, seemed shocked. Had she believed Elegy's fakery too? That gave her even *more* of a thrill.

This next part would be extra fun. Before the Cinder King could fire his weapon at Zellion, Elegy attacked. Not him, but the other Charred.

She started with the one holding Rebeke. Slipping the little fragment of sunheart from her waistband, Elegy lunged and pressed it against the cinderheart of the nearby Charred, then spoke Zellion's incantation. Immediately the Charred dropped Rebeke, and his cinderheart's color lightened. He stumbled back, gasping, his link to the Cinder King disrupted.

Elegy pulled Rebeke away as that Charred—suddenly allowed to do whatever he wanted—chose the next Charred in line and immediately attacked. Elegy grinned wider and freed a second Charred, then leaped back as that woman went into a frenzy and started laying about with her cudgel.

Elegy only had time to free one more before the Cinder King realized what she was doing. "Treason most foul!" he shouted, shoving aside a freed Charred who tried to attack him. "What is this? How…"

Then he focused again on Zellion's ship. Cursing, the Cinder King fired—but he'd hesitated just long enough. The shots hit behind the *Dawnchaser*, which maintained a steady pace toward Union. It was remarkable, she thought, what that little vessel had survived.

"Kill that one!" he shouted, pointing at Elegy.

The three remaining Charred went for her, but the three she had loosed were causing chaos, attacking officials and civilians who had gathered to watch. The Cinder King was forced to pull two Charred away from attacking Elegy to protect himself.

Others came running to the scene, and soon she struggled gloriously against four opponents. She lost track of Rebeke in the chaos, and was forced backward toward the edge of the city as she defended herself.

She did…fine. The others had a frenzy that she understood, but she'd been learning to think, and that served her well. She backed away strategically and put the large gun between herself and the others. As they scrambled around it, she was able to spring up and climb over it, dropping down so she could briefly engage one of the Charred alone.

She broke his leg with her cudgel, then was fiddling with her sunheart fragment when a voice called out from behind her. "You are able to think for yourself?" the Cinder King asked. "Do you *remember*? Does it *hurt* if you hear this?"

Rebeke screamed.

Elegy looked to see Rebeke in his grip—his bare hand on her neck, leeching away her heat. Strangely it *did* hurt Elegy—and anger her—to see that. Rebeke was…someone that should be protected. Elegy howled, but then was tackled from behind by one of the other Charred, her sunheart fragment slipping from her fingers and bouncing away.

"Yes, it *does* hurt you, doesn't it?" the Cinder King said. "Curious. Well, perhaps it will hurt even more for you to know what I'm going to do to her. I'll make her into one of you, take away her mind and her soul, and replace it with devotion to *me alone*. When you next meet her, she will try to kill you. Does *that* hurt, Elegy?"

Elegy howled in frustration, losing control, battering at the Charred that had her pinned down. Then another one arrived and slammed his cudgel into her head. She withstood the pain, though, keeping her attention on Rebeke—whom the Cinder King released and pushed into the arms of an official. Rebeke sagged, most of her heat drained.

Another official whispered something urgent to the Cinder King, and he looked out toward the approaching Zellion. "We'll need to go back to the old plan for dealing with him," the Cinder King said. "Is it still ready?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. Faith, go to the command center and put the city into lockdown—no ships leaving. I don't want him slipping out of my grip. The rest of you, with me."

Elegy threw aside the Charred holding her, then caught the cudgel as another tried to pound her head. She even kicked at the leg of a third one as he arrived to help. But she saw at least a dozen more running up the street toward them, summoned to the will of their master.

He walked off at a brisk pace, joined by his officials in white, who pulled a weakened Rebeke after them.

They left Elegy to die. But they didn't realize. She could plan now. She had begun to care. She wouldn't just fight until she was killed. So she broke free from the grips of those coming for her.

And she ran.

She ran with full strength of limb and determination. Away from the Charred. Behind, they howled in frustration at her escape. Though part of her longed to engage them, to fight and claw and batter and kill, she *ran* instead. Farther along the rim of the city until she was able to vault herself up and grab the top of the roof of one of the smaller buildings. A frightened

woman closed the window as Elegy reached the roof, then turned and leaped over the street to the next ship.

Below, Charred clambered over one another to try to reach her. But, not working together, they hampered one another's efforts. Elegy moved back the way she'd come, bounding from rooftop to rooftop until she'd returned to where she'd started. Here, she hopped down and grabbed her sunheart fragment off the ground. Then she ran over two streets to a specific point she'd spied earlier: an open portion of steel deck with no buildings nearby.

Approaching Charred from all directions forced her against the edge. She backed to the very lip, growling softly, staring them down. Then she felt the city shake as something impacted it from below. A moment later, a figure sprang over the side—a figure in smoldering armor, trailing smoke. He landed in front of her, metal feet sparking on the metal street. Then he stood up tall, even more intimidating in the armor than he'd been without it.

"You all right?" he asked her, his voice projected somehow out of the armor. He glanced at her, and the slit at the front glowed a deep red-orange, the color of coals—or sunhearts. The suit seemed simultaneously archaic and modern. It was sleek, with no gaps at the joints that she could see. Yet it was also a reminder of a different time, when soldiers had gone to war encased like this.

"Yeah," she said, breathing heavily. "I planned. I saw you flying toward this spot. I *planned*, Zellion."

"Good."

"They took Rebeke that way," she said, pointing past the gathered Charred, who had retreated at his appearance.

"Was the Cinder King with them?"

"Yes."

"Then that's the way I'm going," he said.

"Do you have your weapon?"

"No," he said. "It's keeping the people of Beacon alive right now—and summoning it would mean instant death to them."

"Then we're both unarmed," she said.

"I wouldn't say that," he told her as the Charred started to move in. "I'll assume none of you have seen Shardplate in action before. Stand back and enjoy this next part. I'll make us a path."

He stomped forward, armor clanging against the deck, and met the first Charred head-on, swinging in a powerful uppercut. The Charred—still accustomed to powering through hits—didn't bother to dodge. So Zellion's

punch connected and tossed the Charred like a doll over the nearby ships to land somewhere in the distance.

He spun and seized another, tossing her into several others coming his way. He moved like a demolition machine, using the Charred as weapons against one another. In an incredible sequence of destruction, he threw them, stomped them, *broke* them.

Unlike before, however, the Cinder King wasn't there to be frightened. So they kept coming. Elegy watched in awe, then noticed the cracks appearing in Zellion's armor. He was a terrible force, with strength like a machine, but he couldn't stop them all. They got in occasional hits with cudgels or machetes—and those blows left cracks in the armor, like it was made of glass.

Shaking free of her awe, Elegy ran forward and began to cleanse the wounded Charred's cinderhearts, one at a time. They, once freed, tried to kill her. But she ducked away, leaving them to attack other Charred instead, increasing the chaos.

In an explosion of light, part of the strange armor actually *burst* beneath a hit, spraying sparks and glowing metal chunks. It was one of the shoulder pieces, but Zellion kept fighting, breaking bones, and tossing Charred until —at last—the street fell still. Not silent—no, there were too many moans and screams from frustrated, wounded Charred for that. But the supply of attackers was depleted, like a gun running out of energy.

Zellion slumped forward, and she could hear him breathing deeply from within his helmet. Then his armor began to disintegrate, vaporizing to smoke, leaving him—in seconds—exposed. He struggled to his feet and picked up a fallen machete.

"Can you bring it back?" Elegy asked, approaching him on a deck slick with blood.

"I don't know," he said. "Not soon, I suspect. I'm…not sure how the relationship stands between me and my armor. But it felt good to bear it again." He looked around at the destruction he'd wrought. "Poor souls. Taken and forced into this."

"They enjoyed it," she promised. "You gave them a fight like they've never known. Besides, some escaped." She pointed to the ones she'd freed, who had made their way down side alleys, looking for fights with common civilians.

Maybe…she should not be happy about that. Yes, she could see from his frown that perhaps…that was a bad thing.

“We need to find the Cinder King,” he said.

“I know where they’ll take Rebeke,” she said. “He wants to make her into a Charred. I was born in that very place.”

Zellion nodded, following her lead as they moved through the city, which had grown quiet as the people hid. Near the center of Union was their Reliquary, where the Chorus was kept. Beside it was the Hall of Burning, where the Cinder King made his Charred.

Together, she and Zellion burst out into the open ground surrounding these two buildings. And there was the Cinder King. Standing off to the right, partway down a wide street, hands on hips. Waiting.

“I’ll handle him,” Zellion said, hefting his machete. “You go rescue your sister.”

“I want to fight,” she snapped.

“I know. But is that what you *need*?”

“They’re different?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding to the Cinder King, who waved him forward. “He’s planning something. A trap. Can you outthink him?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I can push through the trap, whatever it is! I can kill him.”

“Can you, Elegy?” Zellion met her eyes. “Should you?” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Right now, you need to give up that fight to save your sister instead. That’s what your people need. That’s the path *you* need to be on.”

She didn’t feel his words. But she…she believed them anyway. She nodded.

“Go,” he said. “When you rescue Rebeke, tell her something for me. There is a way to recharge sunhearts. Put some heat in an empty one and leave it out in the sun, and when you come back around, it will be renewed. The days of sacrifices are done. The Beaconites know, but I want as many to hear as possible. They deserve this truth.”

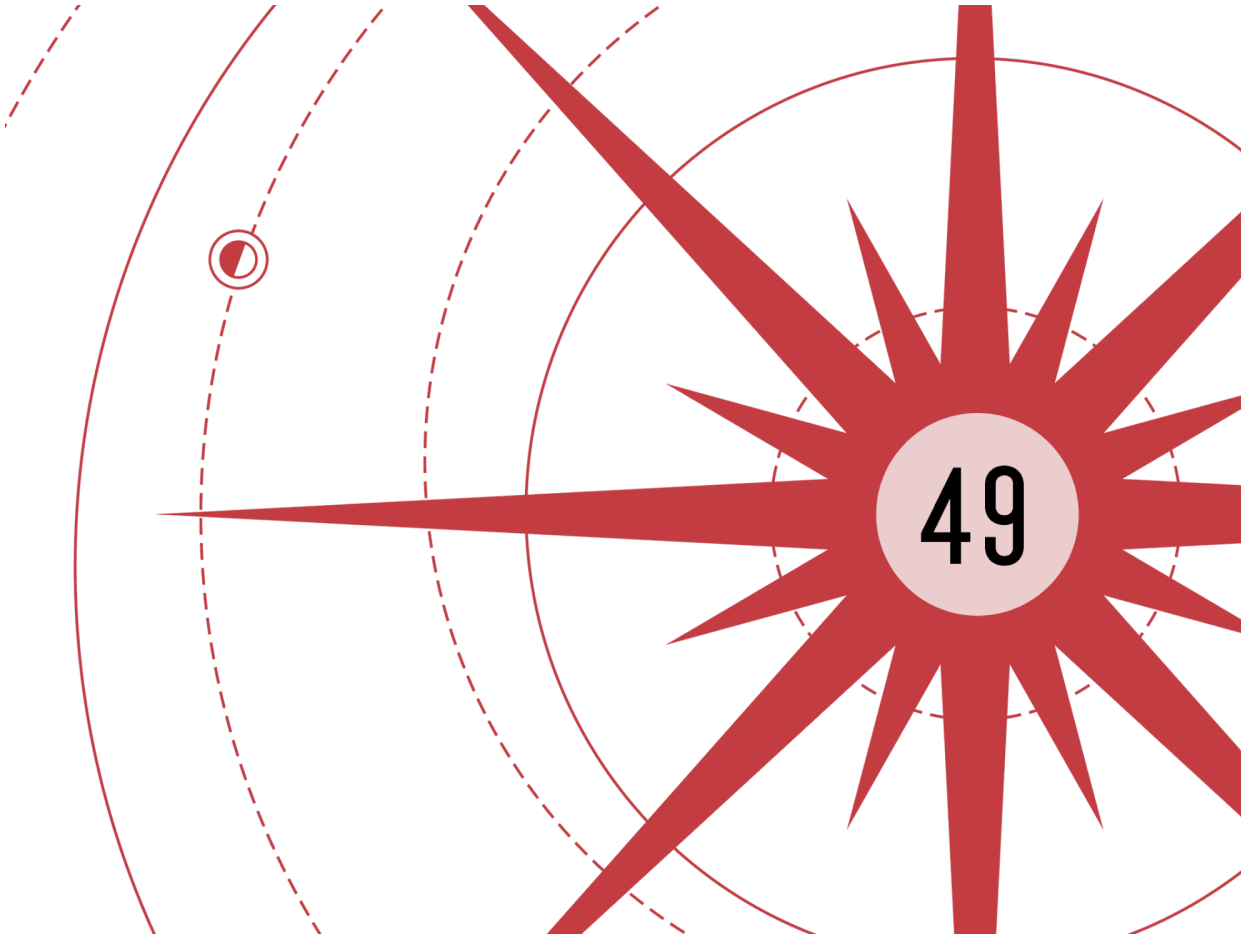
“I will.”

“Oh, and Elegy? Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving me someone worthy to fight alongside,” he said, turning toward the Cinder King. “I think that helped me remember which path *I* need to be on.”

With that, they parted toward their separate destinies.



"WHAT DO YOU think, Aux?" Zellion said, walking calmly toward the Cinder King. "Do you spot snipers?"

No response. Damnation. It hurt anew when he remembered.

He stopped within shouting distance of the Cinder King, feeling strangely exposed without his armor. A short time back in it, and already he felt reliant?

"I'm here to give you that fight you offered!" Zellion called to the man. "Do you still want it?"

"Indeed!" the Cinder King shouted back. "Hand to hand. You and me. No interference by others! Isn't that a tradition among your people? A trial of honor, one on one?"

It was more of an Alethi thing actually, not an Azish one. His people preferred to settle differences with extended court battles and flowery legal speeches. But that distinction was irrelevant, because he doubted the Cinder King intended to play fair—no matter what he said.

So Zellion was ready for the snipers even without Auxiliary to spot them. He dodged toward the wall of a building as the shots hit behind him. Not Invested shots, though. They'd switched to regular slug throwers? Why?

He neared the wall he intended to use as cover, but a dozen officers in white coats broke through nearby windows and doors, then opened fire at him with pellets that hurt, but didn't pierce. They battered him, weakened him, as Charred surrounded him and came in swinging with clubs. Zellion struggled, pushed, fought back—until one of them wrapped something around his wrist.

Ice flooded his veins. His heat leeched away. He wavered, but didn't fall—because the bracer shut off a second later. They hadn't wanted to knock him out, just leave him weakened. They affixed something else on his leg. The Charred retreated, and the officers vanished.

Zellion stumbled, barely able to stand upright. Then an announcement rang through the city. "People of Union!" The Cinder King's voice. Recorded previously? "You have heard of this offworlder, the one some are whispering is the Sunlit Man. He is here. I offer you a chance to watch him. See him fall."

The Cinder King walked slowly up to Zellion. Security cameras ringed the area, all tracking the Cinder King's every movement, filming as he dramatically unlocked the bracer on Zellion's wrist, took it off, then held it up, showing everyone that he'd freed his enemy. He tossed the bracer aside, then kicked away Zellion's fallen machete.

"Now then," the Cinder King said, raising his fists. "That duel of honor. You and me. Shall we?"

Zellion shook himself, attempting to recover his strength. Maybe this would actually be fair. He raised his fists, but found them sluggish. In fact, his entire body felt heavy, like he was tied with weights. He could barely get his fists into a fighting stance.

"What have you done to me?" he growled.

"A gift from our friends in the hidden ship," the Cinder King said. "The freezing bracers are fine, but they tend to knock out my subjects—and sometimes I want them alert. Just…a little bit disadvantaged."

"A little bit?" Zellion growled, shifting his stance, though even that took an uncomfortable amount of effort. "It's one of those Scadrian weight devices, isn't it? That's what you locked onto my ankle?" He'd seen people wear them on low-gravity planets to move more naturally. Here, though, it

had been turned up an extreme amount—making his entire body think it was working under three or four times the standard gravity.

The Cinder King smiled, then punched Zellion in the face. He tried to get his fists up to block, but was too slow, and then took a shot right in the gut. He stumbled back.

"Coward," Zellion growled.

"There is no cowardice in victory," the Cinder King said, striding forward.

Zellion got one good punch against the man, splitting his lip. Which healed immediately. Storms, how Invested was he?

Zellion came in again, but too slow, too sluggish. The Cinder King decked him across the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. Zellion took a kick in the stomach, then barely managed to roll away from the next.

He stumbled to his feet, straining, struggling.

"*This* is power," the Cinder King whispered, stepping closer to him, pulling off his gloves to expose his bare fists. A bad idea in a regular fight, as you were likely to do as much damage to your hands as you did to your enemy, but the Cinder King's Investiture would heal him from those surface wounds. "This is what it means to be strong."

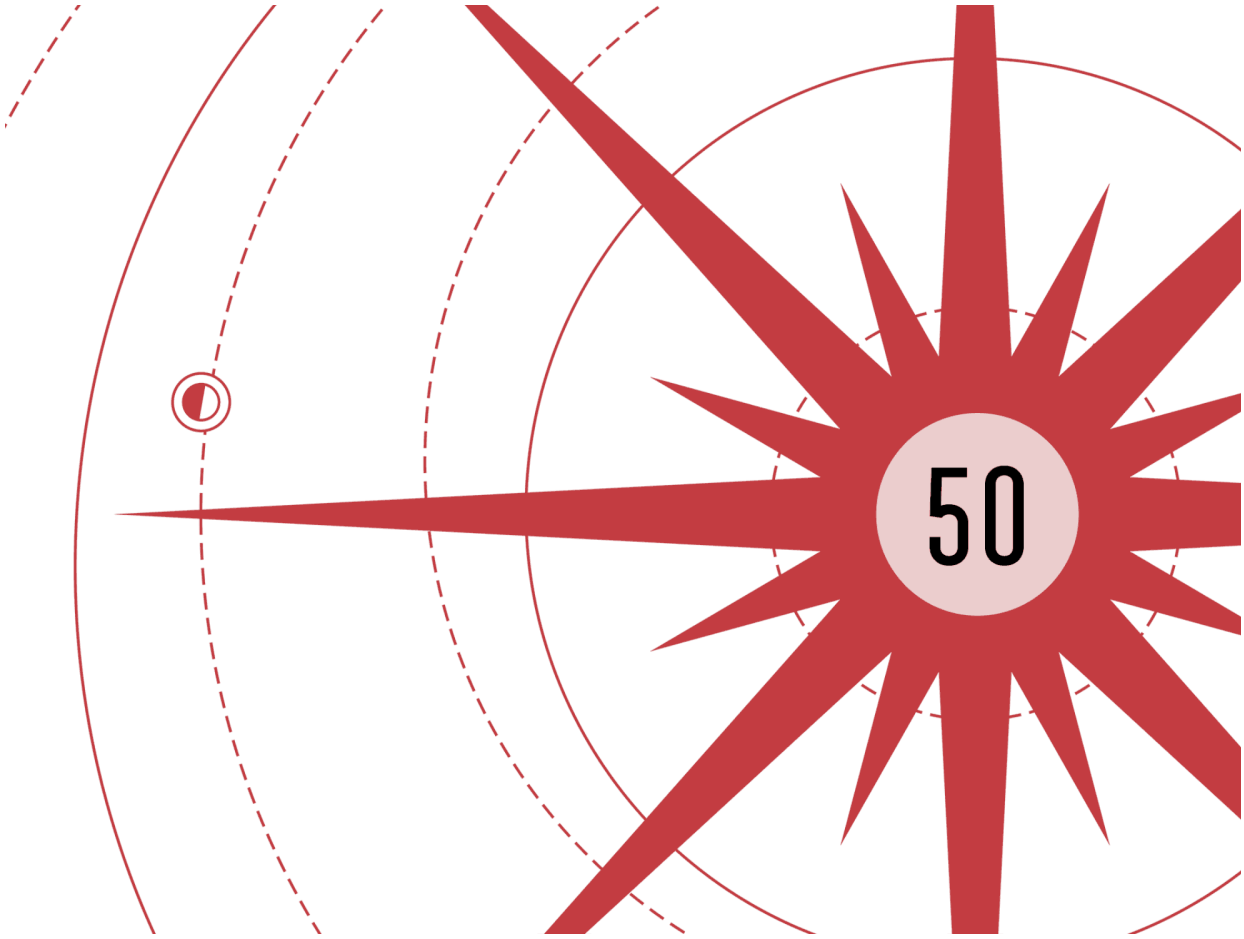
"Then why hide what you're doing from your people?" Zellion hissed. "You want to be able to beat me, but you don't want them to know how? That's not strength. It's fabrication."

"The condemned man always sees unfairness in the world around him," the Cinder King said, punching him again.

Damnation. That *hurt*. Blood began to flow from Zellion's nose as he stumbled back farther along the street. He didn't have Auxiliary to count his Investiture for him any longer, but he could feel it waning, fluttering. His endurance running out, his strength beginning to fail.

"In reality," the Cinder King said, "all I'm doing is using my advantages like you use yours." He laughed, punching Zellion in the stomach. "Come on, now. Let's make a good show of it, Sunlit. People will want to see you die with flair!"

He advanced, relentless, driving Zellion back. Once again, straight toward the rising sun.



ELEGY REMEMBERED THIS place. The unornamented metal steps to the lower level of the ship that made up the heart of Union. She remembered her footsteps on that metal; the sound echoed like the distant workings of some terrible machine.

That's what…that's what she'd become. A machine. A thing, not a person. Bereft of choice, personality, and soul. All had supposedly been burned away, leaving the Cinder King with his perfect killer.

But she remembered. Old memories. Not just when she'd been led from this place as a newborn Charred. But before. Just…those sounds. The footsteps. She remembered descending. Terrified. And she remembered… light?

She found a door at the bottom of the steps, left ajar by people entering in haste, dragging Rebeke behind them. How did *they* feel? Knowing some offworlder monster in a suit of strange armor was assaulting their city—and Charred were going wild—yet being ordered to go execute a captive?

Elegy pushed the door open the rest of the way, and the light was as she remembered it. Hundreds of sunhearts set into slots on the walls. The city's reserve. A mausoleum. Full of souls taken by the sun. And one Charred guard.

The man growled and charged at her as soon as she entered. Elegy blocked his swinging cudgel with her forearm and stared him in the eyes. For once, she didn't feel frantic. She felt haunted. Remembering those lights, being towed down this hallway, knowing everything she'd been—everyone she'd loved, everything she'd accomplished—would soon be burned out of her. Like a disease to be killed off by the coming fever.

She tossed the Charred to the side, which shook the wall and rattled the sunhearts. As he struggled to his feet, she took him down with a swift punch to the throat, leaving him gasping through his own blood. A second Charred burst in through the door, but again, she felt *calm* as she stepped aside, grabbing his arm and using his own momentum to slam him into the wall.

He dropped.

She remembered. Just the pain, though, and terror. She didn't remember *what* she'd loved, known, or believed. She only remembered knowing she'd lose it. That seemed a worse cruelty, to be left with the panic and pain, but not the original pieces of herself that had evoked such emotion. She pushed forward through the corridor lined with souls.

She stepped over the body of the first Charred and burst into the chamber where new Charred were made. Along the wall, a line of frightened people waited. New subjects to transform into Charred, to fight those she had freed, perhaps. Only three officials worked to prepare them, and they were being sloppy in their haste. For example, they strapped Rebeke into place without disrobing her.

That meant that as they engaged the machine, a spear tipped with a burning cinderheart descending to touch Rebeke's chest, it set her shirt aflame. Elegy remembered screaming when it had happened to her.

Rebeke looked to the side, toward Elegy, eyes wide with terror—and the light in them started to fade.

No.

No, not that.

Not to her.

Elegy screamed again, in tune with her scream in the past, and both moments resonated as one. She leaped across the room, grabbing the

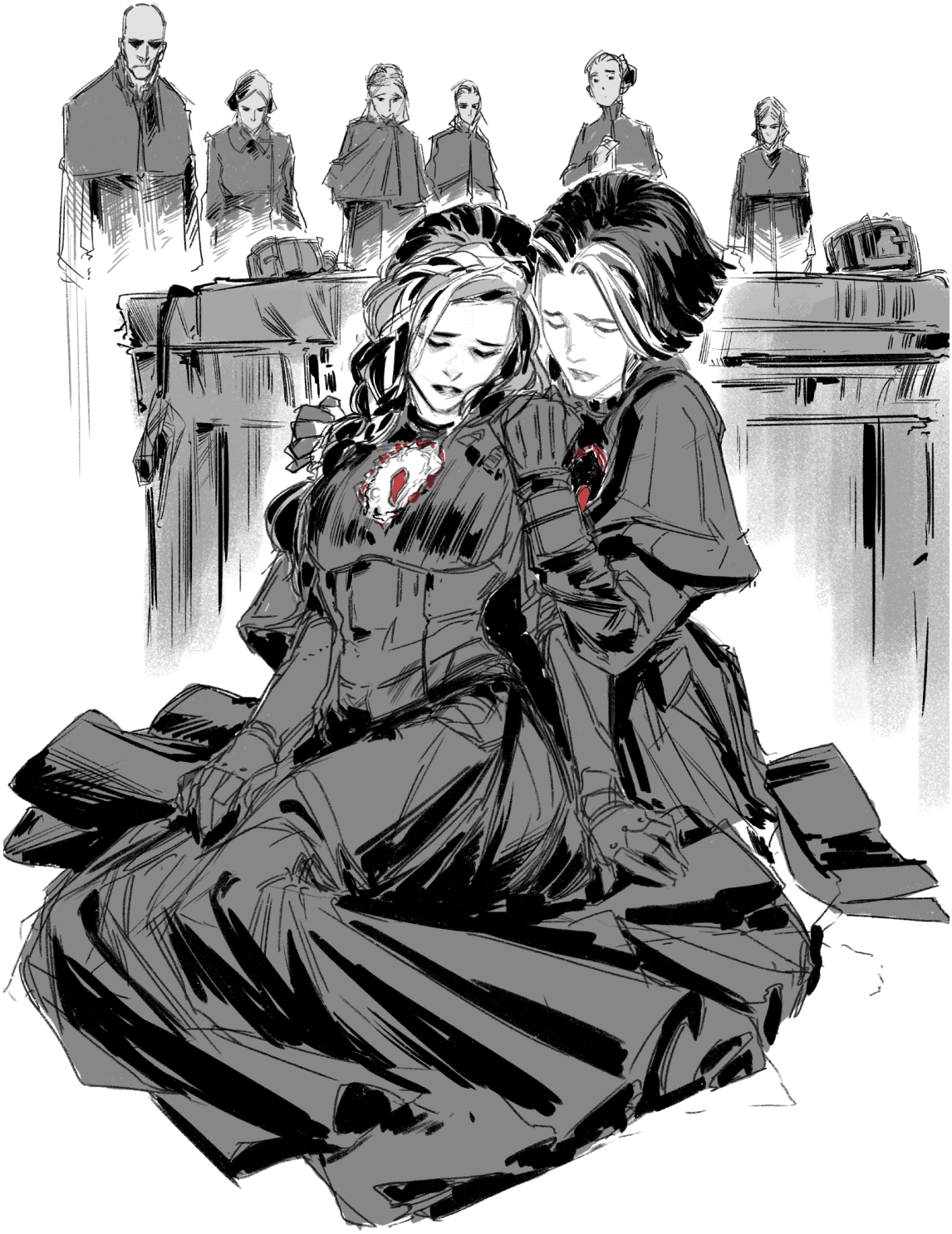
machinery and ripping the spear from its place. She pulled at Rebeke's bonds, breaking her free, and hauled the younger woman off the table.

But the cinderheart had implanted. Rebeke's skin turned ashen, darkening before the fire—which flared brighter and brighter.

No, no, no, *no*!

Elegy scrambled, feeling at her waist. Where had she slipped that sliver of sunheart? Rebeke was trembling, eyes unfocusing, a wail leaving her lips.

Elegy could feel it. The terrible fire at her core. Consuming everything, the moment stretching like heated metal, as loves vanished, hopes evaporated, memories became ash…



Shouting something raw—a word unformed—Elegy pulled her sister close and felt Rebeke's warmth against her hollow of a chest. Where her self had been destroyed. She clung to Rebeke and whispered the words. "Bold one on the threshold of death, give my cinderheart your heat, that you may remember and bless those who still live."

Their cinderhearts couldn't touch, not with Elegy's sunken so far into her core. She felt something anyway, a violent warmth coming into her from Rebeke. Through their skin, moving from one vessel to another.

That heat burned away the last memories Elegy had—mostly of pain, but also of this room, of those echoes of footsteps on metal. The final remnants of her old self died. But when she pulled away, she found that the cinderheart had stopped sinking into Rebeke's chest.

Instead it had embedded into her like a gemstone into a piece of jewelry—leaving her with a burst of ashen skin around it, creeping up her neck. Her breasts were whole, however, and her chest cavity had not sunken in or been burned away.

Rebeke blinked, then breathed in, her eyes focusing on Elegy. "E… Elegy?"

"Yes," Elegy said, shocked to feel tears on her cheeks. What was this feeling? It was nearly as overwhelming as the desire to kill.

"You stopped it," Rebeke said. "I'm still me. I remember…Elegy! You *saved* me. You're holding me, looking at me like… You remember me, don't you?"

"Yes," Elegy lied. Because it was the right thing to say, the right thing for her to be. "I…do not remember, but I *feel*. Some things. From before."

"The rest might return too!"

It wouldn't. Elegy was confident of that. She'd just given away what little *had* remained. Still, she had stopped Rebeke from being taken. That was enough. She settled her sister, then checked on the officials in the room, who had pressed themselves against the wall. One was reaching for a gun on the counter. Elegy met his gaze and shook her head.

He backed away, hands up. There were still those two Charred in the hallway, though. She had crushed the throat of one of them, but the second would still be dangerous. She checked on them, but found them standing in the corridor outside, eyes distant. As if dazed.

"Elegy," Rebeke said, "I can *feel* them. The Charred. Why can I feel them?"

“The cinderhearts link us,” she said, “through the Cinder King. The process didn’t complete with you, but perhaps you gained some of that link. Can you hear his thoughts?”

“No. But Elegy, how does the Cinder King control the others?”

“Through his cinderheart,” she said. “One that—” Elegy turned toward Rebeke and the glowing cinderheart embedded into her skin. “One that didn’t consume him like it did us.” She knelt, eager. “Can you control them?”

Rebeke frowned. “I…I’m trying.”

The Charred in the hallway looked toward her, heads cocked. But didn’t move.

“I’m trying to make those two come into the room and sit down,” Rebeke explained. “But something is blocking me.”

“The Cinder King.”

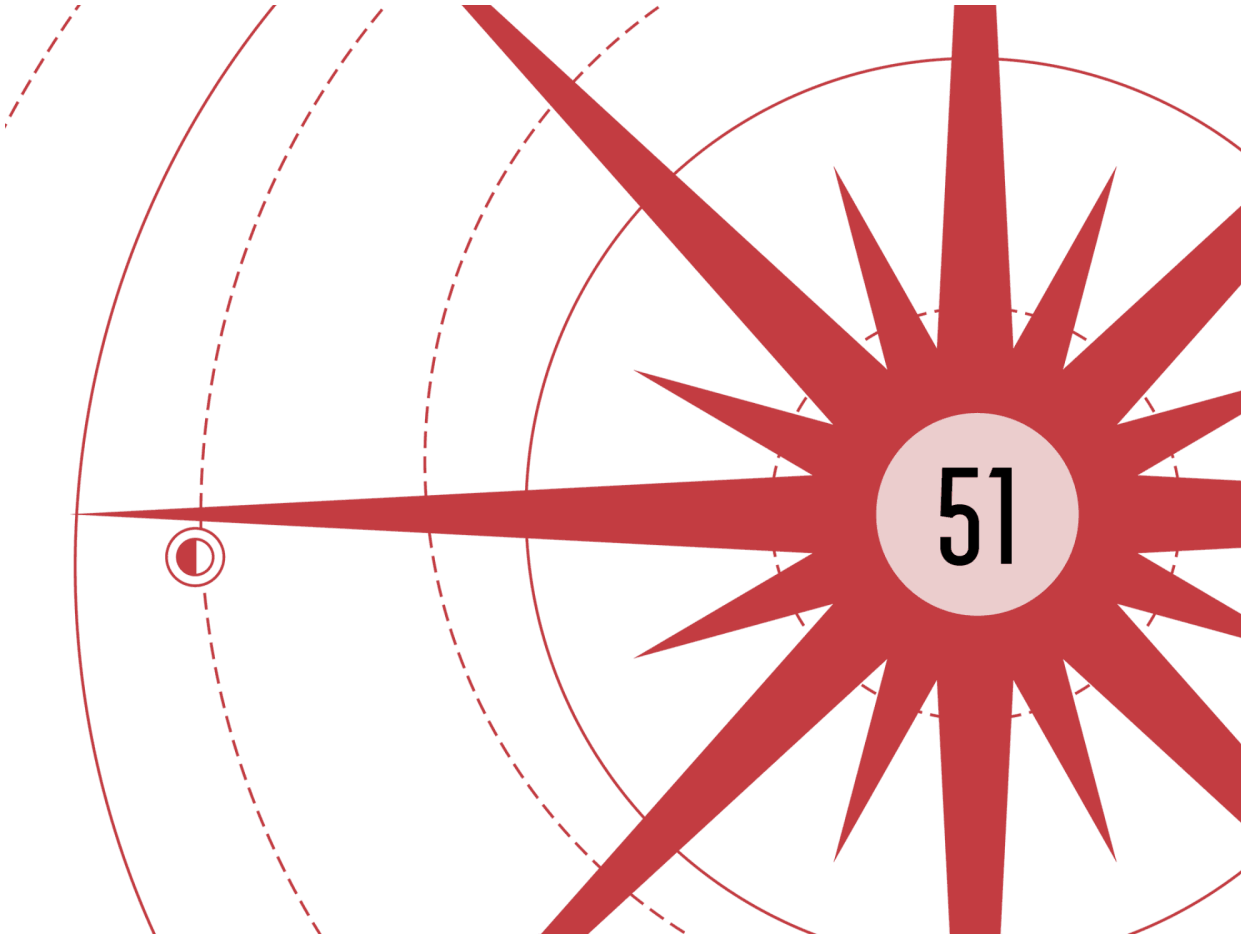
Rebeke nodded. “He’s stronger than I am, Elegy. But I think…I think the other Charred will ignore me—or at least not attack me. What should we do?”

“All I know is how to break things,” Elegy said. “You’ll have to make the difficult decisions.”

Rebeke grimaced at that, looking overwhelmed.

“Rebeke,” Elegy said. “Zellion is fighting the Cinder King. Before we separated, he asked me to tell you something. He said…there is a way to recharge sunhearts, so people don’t need to die to make more. The Beaconites know about it. He said the more people who know, the better.”

Rebeke’s frown deepened. Then she took a deep breath and stood up with Elegy’s help. “We need to get to Union’s command center.”



ZELLION ROLLED ACROSS the deck of Union, face bloody, ribs screaming. The Cinder King had bullied and beaten him all the way back to where he'd started—across the bloodied mess where he'd killed many Charred, to the edge of Union.

He forced himself to his feet once again. But storms, he hadn't landed a second punch. He couldn't fight back. How could he beat this man if he couldn't fight…

Couldn't fight back?

The absurdity of it struck him, and he found himself laughing—even though it sent a spike of agony through his chest. The Cinder King paused, frowning.

"Don't mind me," Zellion said, struggling to lift a hand to wipe his eyes—but failing, letting it flop back to his side. "I just realized something. I've been training to beat you this entire time."

"This is what 'beating me' looks like?" the Cinder King said, gesturing.

Zellion shrugged. His Torment, the stupid curse… It couldn't have been *preparing* him for this, could it?

He discarded the thought as ridiculous. The Torment wasn't *alive*; it didn't *plan*. It was a coincidence that he found himself in this spot, after being forced to engage enemies time and time again without being able to fight.

Storms. He had to get off this planet, or *everything* would start looking like part of some nebulous, deific plan. He nodded to the Cinder King, who came in to punch him again. This time, Zellion didn't try to block or dodge. He fell into the swing, grunting as it connected, but then grabbed the Cinder King by his clothing.

"Grappling," the man said, trying to pry free Zellion's fingers. "The coward's art."

"I know a few people who'd be seriously offended by that," Zellion said. Then held on tighter. His body was severely weighed down, but his finger strength had been unaffected, and so he managed to keep hold of the tyrant's clothing as the man spun them around, working to get free. The Cinder King eventually pushed his bare hand against Zellion's face and muttered something.

Heat began to flow from Zellion to the Cinder King, who—despite performing the maneuver purposefully—seemed shocked. "Wait. Why does that work *now*?"

"Because for some reason," Zellion said, "people still have faith in me. Thank you for turning us around."

The Cinder King met his eyes, then Zellion heaved toward him and let his weight topple them both backward. He wasn't in control. He just fell, using essentially the same maneuver he'd pulled on Elegy in the arena during their initial clash.

It worked just as well now as it had then. The Cinder King could struggle all he wanted, but he had made Zellion into a deadweight, four times as heavy as a man. You didn't simply shove that aside. Their momentum sent them both tumbling off the ship.

A brief fall followed, and then they hit the soft earth.

Zellion *saw* pain. It flashed across his vision with vibrant, garish colors as his already broken body was subjected to another terrible blow. Fortunately he broke his fall on the Cinder King.

"Idiot," the man said, shoving Zellion to the side. "What do you think you've done? Gotten me muddy?"

Zellion didn't have the breath to respond. Instead—arduous though the effort was—he stood up. Then raised his fists.

"You know," the Cinder King said, "I expected this to be a better show." He decked Zellion again, sending him to the mud.

And with effort, he got up.

"You should be a better fighter," the Cinder King said, tripping him, then kicking him in the broken ribs.

Zellion gasped, then—slowly—got up.

"This is almost *painfully* anticlimactic," the Cinder King said, attacking again.

Zellion took the blow.

Then got up.

And hoped it would be enough.

MOST TOWNS AND cities on Canticle had a central command—where the whole community could be steered when locked together—but not all of them had the restrictions Union did. Rebeke explained to Elegy as they arrived: People weren't free on Union. They couldn't unlock their ships without permission.

The door into the command bridge was guarded by five Charred…who simply let Elegy and Rebeke pass. It felt wrong to have them behind her—Elegy almost engaged them on principle, but refrained. Inside the main command room, they found a group of men and women in white coats in front of an array of monitors with security footage, watching Zellion and the Cinder King fight on a screen. The two had fallen to the grass and mud, and the camera was zoomed in, tracking their movements.

At Elegy and Rebeke's entrance, several of the people reached for guns. Elegy moved to attack, but Rebeke took her arm. "We can't fight them all."

Elegy could *absolutely* fight them all. She just probably wouldn't win.

"You're from Beacon," one of the officers said. "You're the sister of…" He focused on Elegy, then paled. "Of her."

"I've brought her to you," Rebeke said. "To speak and persuade you."

Wait.

What?

"Rebeke," Elegy said, taking the younger woman by the arm and whispering. "I can't do that."

“You said you were remembering,” Rebeke said, with what she probably thought was an encouraging smile. “Dig deep. You’re still in there, Elegy.”

Shades. “No. I’m not, Rebeke. I’m *really* not.”

“Then…”

“You need to do it,” Elegy said. “Say what I cannot.”

Rebeke turned to the others in the room, who were regarding them with confusion—but with guns still raised at the ready.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Rebeke said. “We’re not going to attack you. I just want you to listen.” She nodded toward the monitor they’d been watching. “Did the offworlder knock them down, off the city?”

The room was silent for a moment, then one woman—sitting at a control station—nodded.

“He’s trying to show you,” Rebeke said, “that the Cinder King is weak.” She paused then, cocking her head. Because Zellion was *not* giving a good showing in the fight. He kept getting knocked down. What had happened to his skill?

“The Cinder King is cheating, isn’t he?” Rebeke asked.

Again, the room was silent. Elegy would almost rather have gone the “fight them all and probably die” route. This silence was annoying.

“Yes,” a different operator finally said. “He usually does something like this. Makes it seem like he’s unstoppable.”

“He fights Charred sometimes,” another said. “But they’re always weakened first.”

“Thinks nobody knows,” another added. “But we all do. I mean, it’s obvious.”

“This is your chance,” Rebeke said, stepping forward. Then she stepped back again, raising her hands as their grips tightened on their weapons. “Look! He’s off the ship, and the sun is rising. All we need to do is fly. Leave him behind.”

“His Charred will kill us!” one of the operators said.

“The Charred who didn’t stop us from coming in here?” Rebeke said. “Things are changing. Everything is changing. Listen. We have learned how to *recharge* sunhearts.”

“What?” one of the men with a gun said, lowering it. “You lie.”

“No,” she said. “No more sacrifices. No more lotteries. No more immolating our parents.” Tears leaked down her cheeks as she stepped forward again, this time uncaring of the reaction. “I left my mother for the

sun. I watched my sister be taken, and my brother die to the Cinder King's own weapon. Haven't we sacrificed enough?"

"He's too strong!" one of the women said.

Rebeke waved to the monitor, where the Cinder King was forced to keep knocking Zellion down. "Does he *look* strong?"

Silence. This time, though, Elegy found herself thoughtful. She watched Zellion stand up again. She'd been wrong about Rebeke's strength. Had she been wrong here too?

Yes.

Because if the Cinder King couldn't break a man that he'd handicapped and beaten to a pulp, then what strength could he *possibly* pretend to possess?

There was so much to learn.

"I know," Rebeke said, "what it's like to feel powerless. I know you've felt it, watching what he's done to the city, to people you love. You've cowered before him because there was no other option.

"But today you have a *choice*. Steer us away. Leave him." Rebeke paused, then parted the remnants of her shirt, revealing her exposed cinderheart—and the skin burned around it.

A hush fell over the room.

"I," Rebeke said, "am the Sunlit One. I control the Charred now, and I have come to bring you freedom. I offer this, but do not demand. I will not force you because the *world is changing*. Today we make choices. Please."

Weapons lowered.

People exchanged looks.

Then finally the woman who had spoken first stood up. "Shades, *I'll* do it." She took the controls at the front of the room, and nobody stopped her.

With that, Union abandoned its king. Leaving him in the mud. And it was *so* gratifying to see his expression, filmed, as he watched it happen.

The people in the room settled down, seeming shocked by what they'd done—or allowed to be done. But one problem remained. Elegy took Rebeke by the arm and steered her to the side, speaking softly. "What of Zellion?"

"Shades," she said, turning to the room. "We need to send a ship to rescue the offworlder."

"Send a ship?" one of them asked. "Sunlit, the city is on lockdown by the Cinder King's order—we can't undo it. For one hour, no ships may leave, no matter what."

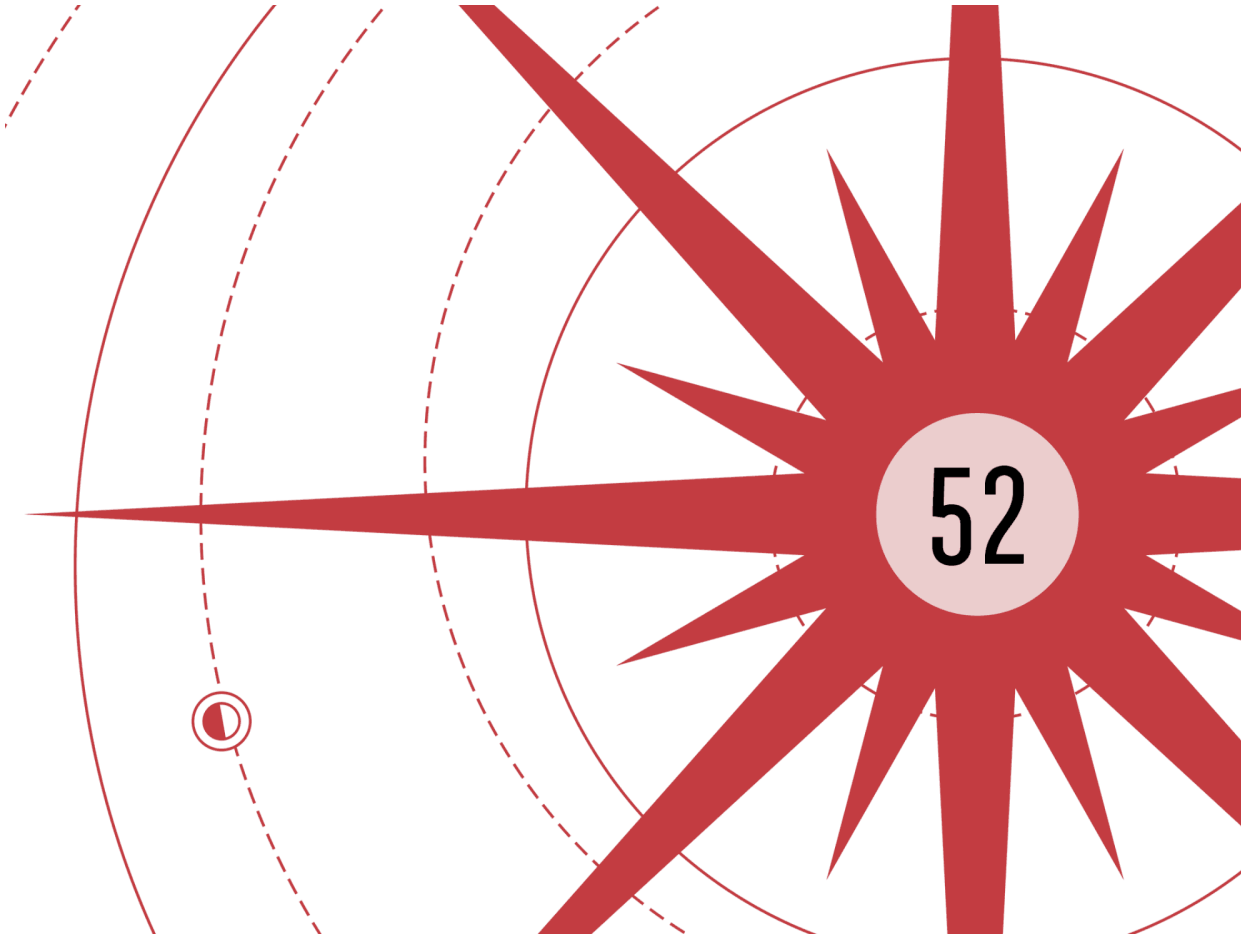
“The Cinder King is paranoid,” another said. “Only he can unlock it. Until the time is up.”

“Guess he never thought we’d fly the whole thing off without him…” a woman added.

Rebeke turned. “We need to get the ship Zellion flew in on…” She trailed off as she saw it in the background on the monitor. The *Dawnchaser* lay in a smoldering heap.

It had served them well, been through the great maelstrom and back. But it would never fly again. Particularly not with the sunlight advancing, relentless. Dangerously close to the two struggling men—mere specks now that the city was moving away at full speed.

“Farewell, killer,” Elegy said, holding Rebeke as she wept. “And thank you, in turn, for giving *me* someone to fight *with*. Not merely someone to fight beside.”



THE CINDER KING jogged after the city a short distance, but even with his Investiture, he would never be able to catch up to it. Nor could he outrun the sun. Zellion knew. He had tried.

He grinned as the man turned back, wild-eyed, light from the horizon reflecting on his face.

"You," the Cinder King said, stalking to him, "will summon that armor again and give it to me."

"Can't," Zellion said, exhausted.

The Cinder King growled, prowling forward, seizing Zellion by the sides of his head. "Then I will kill you."

"You'll die in turn."

"No," the Cinder King said. "I read that book. I know about your tool, your weapon. The Shardblade? I know that if you die, it will be left at your side. To be claimed." He pointed. "You left a shield around those people. What happens when I kill you? It vanishes, doesn't it?"

Zellion gritted his teeth.

Yes. If he died, his weapon would appear by his side. Unbonded.

"I will take it and protect myself," the Cinder King said, draining Zellion's heat.

A deep coldness crept through Zellion, like frost growing on his bones. He gasped.

"And then," the Cinder King said, "when the city returns, they will see me for what I am. *Immortal.*"

Such freezing cold, it made his heart shudder.

"I will flay those who betrayed me," the Cinder King whispered. "None will ever stand against me again. Not while I wield the beautiful sword of the offworlder. I will unify everyone. A single, glorious city, ruled by one man."

Zellion felt that chill growing, and everything becoming as frost. And yet…

He hadn't made an oath to protect those people.

But he'd *promised* Auxiliary. In the moment, that word was far, *far* stronger. Zellion dug deep inside and found a spark that—long ago—had driven him to take to the skies.

It wasn't redemption, but it might have been remembrance. Auxiliary had told him to go on. And storm it, he would.

He grabbed the Cinder King's wrists, whispering, "Bold one on the threshold of death, give me your heat, that it may bless those who still deserve it."

"A prayer to the dead?" the man said with a chuckle.

"No," Zellion said. "To the *dying*."

He met the man's eyes.

Then pulled the heat from him.

The Cinder King gasped, trying to yank free. Sunlight broke nearby, and Zellion could hear the coming flames. Plants writhed around them before starting to brown.

"Stop!" the Cinder King said.

Heat flooded Zellion as he, now a child of Canticle—but Tormented with the strange ability to feed on Investiture—claimed this man's power in a rush. The Cinder King had been gathering it for so long, taking the heat from others without fear of retribution, that it had built up inside of him. Making his eyes glow. Burdening his soul with the belief that because he could take whatever he wanted, he was great.

"*STOP!*" the man screamed, eyes wide.

"You know the problem," Zellion said, "with ruling by tyranny? There's always someone *stronger*."

The Cinder King struggled frantically, but the glow inside him went out. His eyes became normal, just a common dull hazel. The cinderheart at his chest dimmed, and Zellion found himself *bursting* with energy.

He missed deeply the opportunity to hear Auxiliary's voice telling him one final time his current Investiture threshold. But he didn't need it. One hundred percent Skip capacity achieved, and likely exceeded.

"Enjoy your first sunrise," Zellion whispered. "It will be the best one you see in your entire life."

Light and fire washed over them, and the Charred ex-king burst into flame, his skin shriveling and becoming ash, his very eyes hissing steam and bursting.

In that moment, Zellion activated his Torment, using the huge store of power the Cinder King had prepared for him. Skipping away from the planet, out into the cosmere.

Continuing his journey.

EPILOGUE

ELEGY DROPPED FROM the ship and ran across the dark, muddy ground. Rebeke followed more reservedly, steering a small hover-platform. Only one rotation, and already she was acting with so much decorum, one might think she'd been born to leadership.

They found the sunken pit the scouts had reported. A large hole in the ground, with several feet of mud at the bottom. Within it, waving excitedly, were the people of Beacon. Some waded in the mud, while the young had been placed on top of the powerless ships.

They'd survived. An entire half rotation in the sun, and they'd *survived*. Elegy stood there, grinning, practicing her normal emotions—then leaped to Rebeke's platform as it descended. She got her sister muddy, but who cared? Mud happened all the time.

The Beaconites got out of the way of the engine on the bottom of the platform, which sent pungent steam up from boiling mud as it landed.

Several other ships lowered ropes for the stronger to climb, but this platform was for the elderly.

Three women were soon helped up. Muddy, exhausted, the Greater Good had withstood their ordeal. They looked to Rebeke, who had found a dress she could wear that was cut low to reveal her cinderheart and scarred skin.

Compassion understood first. "Sunlit…Woman?"

"Sunlit One," Rebeke said softly.

"The Cinder King?" Confidence asked.

"Dead," Rebeke said. "We hope to recover his sunheart and use it to power Union for a while. It feels appropriate."

"You need to hear," Contemplation said, smiling a wan smile as the platform lifted off to take them to Union to recover. "There is a way to *recharge* sunhearts."

Rebeke nodded. "He told us. Before he…left."

The three women looked to her. The word lingered. They didn't know for certain. Might not ever know for certain. Had he somehow survived, or had the sun taken him?

But Elegy's heart—which she was training to feel joy—wanted to believe. The dome had stayed up for the day, protecting the Beaconites, before vanishing and leaving only a pit of mud. She had an instinct that said when they recovered the Cinder King's sunheart—the last one that would ever need to be made—it would be alone there in the soil.

"We have work to do," Rebeke said softly as they rose into the sky. "We've already had some communication with people from other corridors—one group even sent a delegation. But we need to reach them *all* and tell them what we've found. We give this information away freely, as it was given freely to us. We *stop* the sacrifices."

"As you wish, Sunlit," Contemplation said.

"No," she said, smiling. "Not as I wish. You are our rulers."

"But—" Confidence gestured to the cinderheart in Rebeke's chest.

"This lets me control the Charred," Rebeke said. "But we're trying to wake them up slowly, to teach them. And I won't see any more of them made. We'll use them for protection, so long as they choose. But I will not be another tyrant. I will be…a symbol, Confidence. A beacon. Nothing more." She smiled, looking to Elegy. "As my sister taught us."

Elegy still hoped she'd get to fight now and then. But if not…well, she was just going to have to find new emotions and activities to enjoy.

And as they rose into the sky, she found that—instead of sounding boring—it felt like an adventure.

STAFF SERGEANT TRUTH-IS-WAITING withdrew from his conference with the people of the floating city. He slouched as he walked, certain these people would be intimidated by military discipline. He didn't want them to remember him. He was on tenuous enough ground, pretending to be from a town in another "corridor" come for explanations.

He slipped into the ship he'd stolen from the first town they'd visited. Inside, other members of the Night Brigade watched the door with hands on weapons. They stood down as he nodded to them, then he slipped into the cab.

The Admiral waited here. They had an admiral, despite being an army. It was their way. Tall, with short black hair and a full military uniform, she stood facing away from him, her hands stiff at her sides. The Admiral was… not the kind to rest. He didn't think he'd ever walked in during a mission and found her sitting.

"Report," she said quietly, resting a hand on her Continuity Chain—the silver, whiplike weapon rolled up and hung at her hip.

"He was here," Truth-Is-Waiting said. "They talk about it freely. He reportedly died about a day back, local time. Fighting the king of this place."

"Died?" the Admiral said, her back still to him.

"Reportedly. Shall we pry for information the, uh, more painful way?"

"You think they have any useful answers to give?"

"Frankly, sir? No."

She tapped her foot in thought.

"I did find something fun," he said. "Scadrian ship, embedded here. Doing 'science.' They had him and didn't report it to us—or even send an amiable greeting. Rude, don't you think?"

She turned to him, eyes glittering, a rare smile turning up the corners of her lips. "Very rude."

"Maybe," he said, "we should pay them a visit and see what *they* know." He shrugged. "Besides. Folks here are our cousins. Feels wrong to slag them for being in the wrong place."

"Being in the wrong place," she said, "is the main reason people get slagged, Truth."

He shrugged again.

"We'll proceed with the Scadrians," the Admiral said. "They will have recordings. We'll find those *far* more reliable than accounts from a bunch of backwater peasants anyway. I have a feeling he's one step ahead of us again. How does he do it?"

"Figure he's just rightly scared."

She didn't reply. But as he left, two shades—with glowing red eyes, bearing the uniforms they'd been wearing when they'd died—joined him from the corners of the room. The Admiral needed no vocal command for them, and their movement meant she obviously wanted to be alone. Not even accompanied by the dead.

She did not like hearing that their prey had slipped away again. Truth hustled to the main chamber.

It was best she remain alone during a time like this.

ZELLION SAT ON the beach, listening to the water roll across the sand, feeling…strange to be out in the sun. Just a normal one, but still. He kept feeling like he should be hiding.

He had a good sense of time, but it was stressful to sit there, waiting. Marking the passing of counted heartbeats with scratches in the sand. Until he was *reasonably* certain that, back on Canticle, the Beaconites would be out of the sunlight and into the darkness.

If he waited too long, they'd suffocate. So he had to use his best guess and summon the weapon back when he thought it was safe. It appeared in his hand as a sword, and he used it to—at long last—cut that stupid weight-increasing band off his leg.

He stretched, feeling freed from a thousand pounds. And yet, another weight replaced it—one upon his soul.

"Did I get the timing right?" he asked. "Did I just burn them alive or did I set them free? Did they get crushed by dirt above? Did Elegy save Rebeke?"

Silence. Auxiliary was dead. Worse than dead, burned away entirely—nothing remaining in the Cognitive Realm. This sword was now a corpse, one truly separated from the soul that had inhabited it.

No voice interrupted his musings to act as a replacement for his withered conscience. He was completely alone.

He'd likely never know what happened to Rebeke, Elegy, the Greater Good, and all the other Beaconites. Because he couldn't afford to look backward, didn't dare bring the forces that chased him anywhere *near* people he cared about. If he ever returned there, they'd know the place meant something to him. Everyone he'd ever spoken to there would become a target.

He had to hope that, since he'd only been there a short time, nobody would realize how deeply he'd come to care for the planet and its people.

In the distance, he spotted another boat. They passed this way often, though he saw no other land in the area. Just this atoll he'd appeared on—and it had been a few inches under water during the recent tide change. It lacked even a single tree.

He groaned softly, climbing to his feet, then formed Aux into a mirrored shield and used it to catch the sunlight. In minutes, the ship had turned his way. The people crewing it turned out to be Sho Del of all things. He hadn't known there were any enclaves of them off Yolen.

Their small ship arrived, and he waded out to meet it. It was time to start running again.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

THIS IS THE ONLY one of the Kickstarter books I wrote while knowing what might end up happening with them.

Let me explain. I wrote *Tress* on a whim, as a gift for my wife. The experience was so much fun that I wanted to try something again, and I had extra time because of COVID-19. I started toying with other stories—and I landed on *Frugal Wizard*. I wrote it, kind of, for myself. A way to prove I could keep going with the momentum I'd built working on *Tress*. A way to do something new, and different, for me.

Yumi was another gift for my wife. I'd written a story in *Tress* based on a prompt she suggested, but with *Yumi*, I really wanted to drill down and write a story *for* her—something I thought she would love. And when I was finished, I had three books, and the "Year of Sanderson" idea started to bud in my mind. I thought that four books, one per quarter, would be the best way to go about that. It *felt* right. I wanted another book.

And I wanted to write a book for you.

The other secret projects were experimental uses of voice. They either weren't Cosmere or had only tangential connections to the Cosmere. I love them all, and I'm absolutely proud of them. This isn't to indicate otherwise. But I knew if I was going to do the Year of Sanderson, I also wanted one book that was more "mainline" Cosmere, dealing with a character I'd planned to be vital to future events, and building up Cosmere lore, not just on side planets, but in an important way.

And so this book is a gift for you. As *Tress* and *Yumi* are gifts for Emily, I designed this for everyone who has been following my journey through all these years. It's still an experiment; I wanted, in this case, to write an epic fantasy with a more breakneck pace. I also wanted to play with some genre tropes I hadn't used before. (Same as the other secret projects.) In this, my guide was old westerns and their modernized versions, like the Mad Max films—stories about the wanderer who gets embroiled in a local problem and then is forced to move on after helping the people there.

Sigzil's story has been building in my mind for quite some time now. My fifth (unpublished) book is called *The Sixth Incarnation of Pandora*. (Maybe my worst title, I know. I never managed to find the right name for it.) It's about an immortal warrior named Zellion, who has lived too long and lost connection to the world around him because he's lost connection to people. My online handle for many a game over the years has been Zellion—mostly because it's a name people don't often take.

In addition, the first Cosmere story I can ever remember writing was about Hoid traveling to a new planet, investigating the magic, and determining if the people there would be good candidates to join an ongoing conflict of a nature that might be too spoilerific to mention here. I never finished that story, written sometime in the '90s, but the idea stayed with me—of someone hopping between worlds in the Cosmere, getting stranded, and being forced to learn the magic to escape.

I connected both of these ideas to Sig while writing the Stormlight Archive. I built out his story in my mind—the apprentice to Hoid who was given a Dawnshard for a short time, and now has to live with an unexpected kind of immortality. I was never satisfied with Hoid as the one warping to new worlds and figuring out the magic, as it didn't fit the right tone for him. I wanted something dynamic, with a chase going on, which would interfere with the things I planned for Hoid to do. (For a short time, Shai was going to be the one bouncing between worlds, though without the Dawnshard connection that I'd flagged for Sigzil.)

Regardless, that's probably more information than you needed! The relevant point is that in late 2021 I realized that I finally had the chance to write Zellion's story. I chose it as the last secret project, as a thank-you to all of you, but also a way to explore a character I'd been meaning to write about for quite some time. This book marks a kind of event for me, as it's my fiftieth novel. Something I find very cool, as it ties back to my fifth novel, written all those years ago. I can't promise I'll do any more stories directly about Sig, but he's relevant for the future of the Cosmere, so he will return. I truly hope you've enjoyed my experimentation with my style and the types of narratives within the Cosmere.

This is one of my last chances to talk to many of you about the wonderful event that was the Kickstarter, so let me take an extra moment to tell you why I dedicated this book to you, the fans.

I sincerely believe that books don't live until they're read. While I think I'd write even if nobody was reading—it's who I am—I thrive because I know the stories are being brought to life by all of you. In this, stories are a special kind of art, particularly ones written down. Each of you imagines this book, and its characters, a little differently—each of you puts your own stamp on it, making it yours. I don't think a story is quite finished until that has happened to it—until the dream in my head has become a reality (even if briefly) in yours.

And so this book is yours, as are all of them once you read them. Thank you so much for bringing life to my work, and to the Cosmere.

Brandon Sanderson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lives in Utah with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. In addition to completing Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time, he is the author of such bestsellers as the Mistborn saga, *Warbreaker*, the Stormlight Archive series beginning with *The Way of Kings*, *The Rithmatist*, the Skyward series, the Reckoners series beginning with *Steelheart*, and the Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians series. He won the Hugo Award for *The Emperor's Soul*, a novella set in the world of his acclaimed first novel, *Elantris*. For behind-the-scenes information on all his books, visit brandonsanderson.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATORS

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THE SUNLIT MAN

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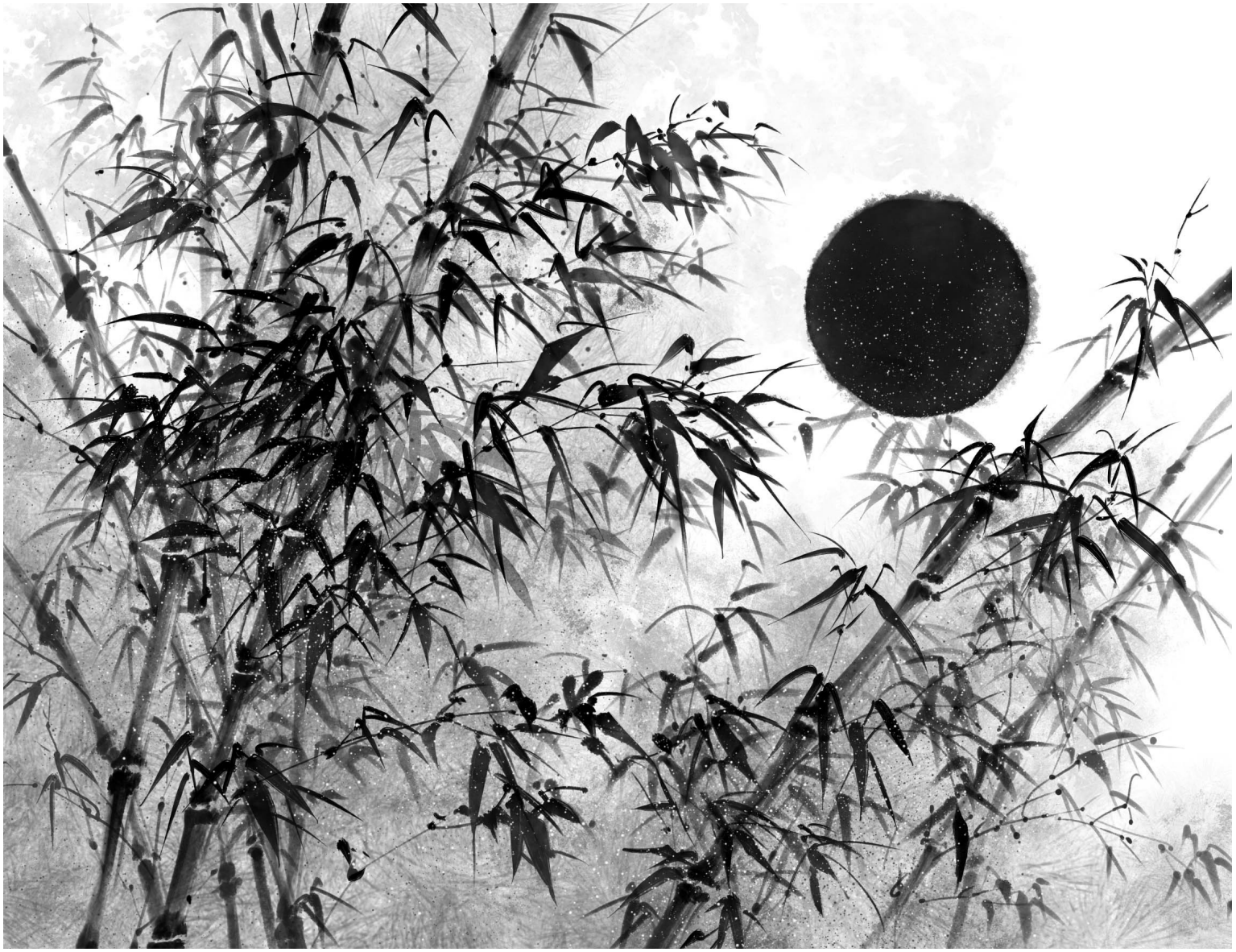
YUMI
AND THE NIGHTMARE
PAINTER
A COSMERE NOVEL
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRANDON
SANDERSON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALIYA CHEN



YUMI
AND THE NIGHTMARE PAINTER

BRANDON SANDERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALIYA CHEN

DRAGONSTEEL

YUMI AND THE NIGHTMARE PAINTER

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ALSO FOR EMILY,
Who, for some amazing reason, gives me her love.

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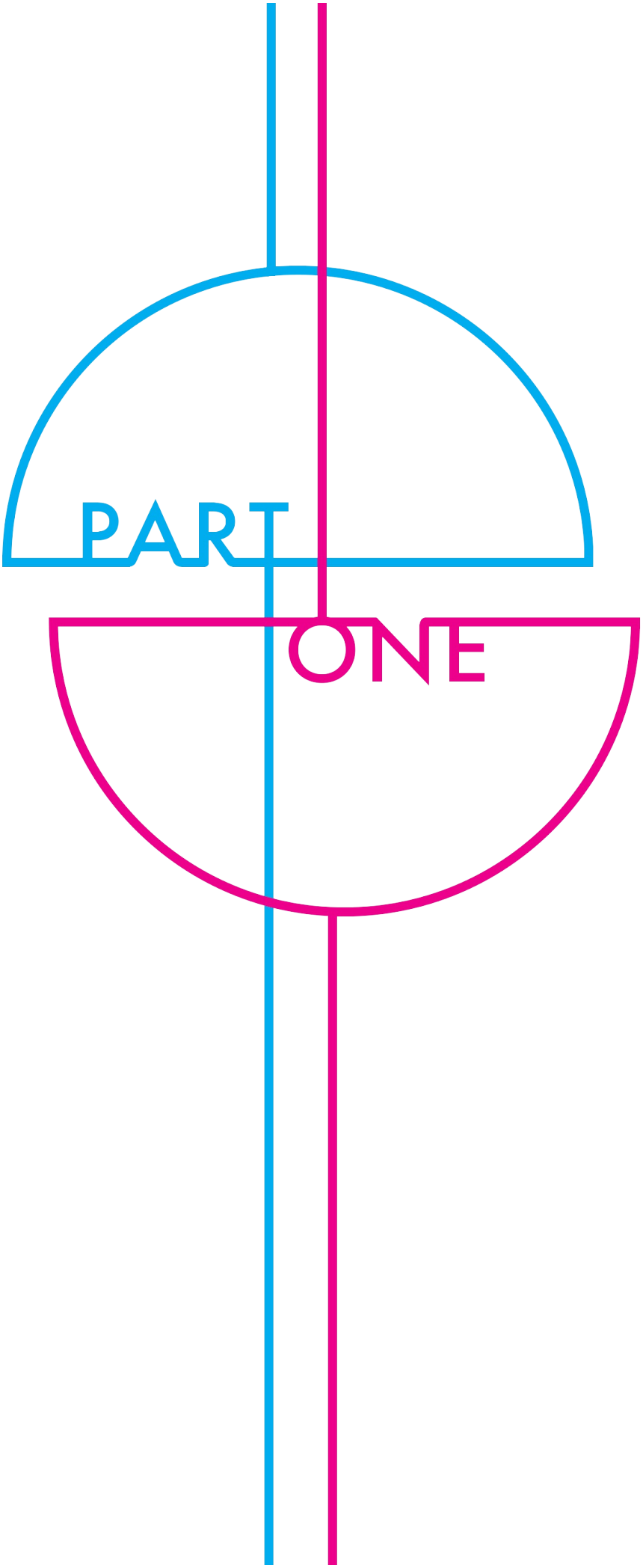
Brandon Sanderson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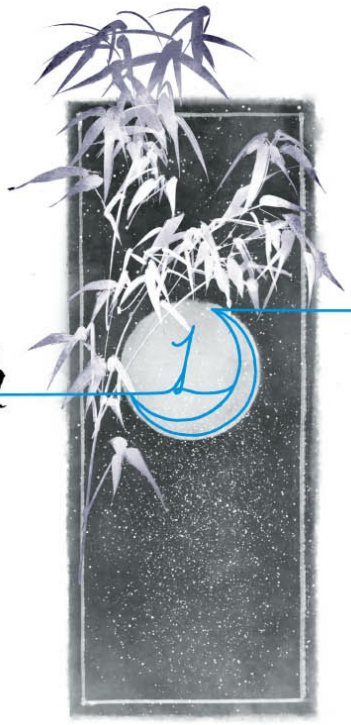


Chapter 1

THE STAR WAS particularly bright when the nightmare painter started his rounds.

The star. Singular. No, not a sun. Just one star. A bullet hole in the midnight sky, bleeding pale light.

The nightmare painter lingered outside his apartment building, locking his eyes on the star. He'd always found it strange, that sentry in the sky. Still, he was fond of it. Many nights it was his sole companion. Unless you counted the nightmares.

After losing his staring match, the nightmare painter strolled along the street, which was silent save for the hum of the hion lines. Ever present, those soared through the air—twin bands of pure energy, thick as a person's wrist, about twenty feet up. Imagine them like very large versions of the filaments in the center of a light bulb—motionless, glowing, unsupported.

One line was an indecisive blue-green. You might have called it aqua—or perhaps teal. But if so, it was an electric variety. Turquoise's pale cousin, who stayed in listening to music and never got enough sun.

The other was a vibrant fuchsia. If you could ascribe a personality to a cord of light, this one was perky, boisterous, blatant. It was a color you'd wear only if you wanted every eye in the room to follow you. A titch too purple for hot pink, it was at the very least a comfortably *lukewarm* pink.

The residents of the city of Kilahito might have found my explanation unnecessary. Why put such effort into describing something everyone knows? It would be like describing the sun to you. Yet you need this context, for—cold and warm—the hion lines were *the* colors of Kilahito. Needing no pole or wire to hold them aloft, they ran down every street, reflected in every window, lit every denizen. Wire-thin strings of both colors split off the main cords, running to each structure and powering modern life. They were the arteries and veins of the city.

Just as necessary to life in the city was the young man walking beneath them, although his role was quite different. He'd originally been named Nikaro by his parents—but by tradition, many nightmare painters went by their title to anyone but their fellows. Few internalized it as he had. So we shall call him as he called himself. Simply, Painter.

You'd probably say Painter looked Veden. Similar features, same black hair, but of paler skin than many you'd find on Roshar. He would have been confused to hear that comparison, as he had never heard of such lands as those. In fact, his people had only recently begun to think about whether their planet was alone in the cosmere. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Painter. He was a young man, still a year from his twenties, as you'd count the years. His people used different numbers, but for ease let's call him nineteen. Lanky, dressed in an untucked buttoned grey-blue shirt and a knee-length coat, he was the type who wore his hair long enough to brush his shoulders because he thought it took less effort. In reality it takes far more, but only if you do it right. He also thought it looked more impressive. But again, only if you do it right. Which he didn't.

You might have thought him young to bear the burden of protecting an entire city. But you see, he did it along with hundreds of other nightmare painters. In this, he was important in the brilliantly modern way that teachers, firefighters, and nurses are important: essential workers who earn fancy days of appreciation on the calendar, words of praise in every politician's mouth, and murmurs of thanks from people at restaurants. Indeed, discussions of the intense value of these professions crowd out other more mundane conversations. Like ones regarding salary increases.

As a result, Painter didn't make much—merely enough to eat and have some pocket cash. He lived in a single-room apartment provided by his employer. Each night he went out for his job. And he did so, even at this hour, without fear of mugging or attack. Kilahito was a safe city, nightmares excluded. Nothing like rampaging semisapient voids of darkness to drive down crime.

Understandably, most people stayed indoors at night.

Night. Well, we'll call it that. The time when people slept. They didn't have the same view of these things that you do, as his people lived in persistent darkness. Yet during his shift, you'd say it *felt* like night. Painter passed hollow streets alongside overstuffed apartments. The only activity he spotted was from Rabble Way: a street you might charitably call a low-end merchant district. Naturally, the long narrow street lay near the perimeter of town. Here, the hion had been bent and curved into signs. These stuck out from shop after shop, like hands waving for attention.

Each sign—letters, pictures, and designs—was created using just two colors, aqua and magenta, the art drawn in continuous lines. Yes, Kilahito had things like light bulbs, as are common on many planets. But the hion worked with no need for machinery or replacement, so many relied on it, particularly outdoors.

Soon Painter reached the western edge. The end of hion. Kilahito was circular, and its perimeter held a final line of buildings, not *quite* a city wall. Warehouses mostly, without windows or residents. Outside of that was one last street, in a loop running around the city. No one used it. It lay there nonetheless, forming a kind of buffer between civilization and what lurked beyond.

What lurked beyond was the shroud: an endless, inky darkness that besieged the city, and everyone on the planet.

It smothered the city like a dome, driven back by the hion—which could also be used to make passages and corridors between cities. Only the light of the star shone through the shroud. To this day, I'm not a hundred percent certain why. But this was close to where Virtuosity Splintered herself, and I suspect that had an effect.

Looking out at the shroud, Painter folded his arms, confident. This was his realm. Here, he was the

lone hunter. The solitary wanderer. The man who prowled the endless dark, unafraid of—

Laughter tinkled in the air to his right.

He sighed, glancing to where two other nightmare painters strolled the perimeter. Akane wore a bright green skirt and buttoned white blouse, and carried the long brush of a nightmare painter like a baton. Tojin loped beside her, a young man with bulging arms and flat features. Painter had always thought Tojin was like a painting done without proper use of perspective or foreshortening. Surely a man's arms couldn't be *that* big, his chin *that* square.

The two laughed once more at something Akane said. Then they saw him standing there.

"Nikaro?" Akane called. "You on the same schedule as us again?"

"Yeah," Painter said. "It's, um, on the chart…I think?" Had he actually filled it out this time?

"Great!" she replied. "See you later. Maybe?"

"Uh, yeah," Painter said.

Akane walked off, heels striking stone, paintbrush in hand, canvas under her arm. Tojin gave Painter a little shrug, then followed, his own supplies in his large painter's bag. Painter lingered as he watched them go, and fought down the urge to chase after them.

He was a lone hunter. A solitary wanderer. An…unescorted meanderer? Regardless, he didn't want to work in a pair or a group, as a lot of the others did.

It would be nice if someone would ask him. So he could show Akane and Tojin that he had friends. He would reject any such offer with stoic firmness, of course. Because he worked by himself. He was a single saunterer. A…

Painter sighed. It was difficult to maintain a properly brooding air after an encounter with Akane. Particularly as her laughter echoed two streets over. To many of his colleagues, nightmare painting was not as…solemn a job as he made it out to be.

It helped him to think otherwise. Helped him feel like less of a mistake. Especially during those times when he contemplated a life where he would spend his next six decades on this street every night, backlit by the hion. Alone.

Chapter 2

YUMI HAD ALWAYS considered the appearance of the daystar to be encouraging. An omen of fortune. A sign that the primal hijo would be open and welcoming to her.

The daystar seemed extra bright today—glowing a soft blue on the western horizon as the sun rose in the east. A powerful sign, if you believed in such things. (An old joke notes that lost items tend to be in the last place one looks. Conversely, omens tend to appear in the first place people look for them.)

Yumi did believe in signs. She had to; an omen had been the single most important event in her life. At her birth, a falling star had marked the sky—indicating that she had been chosen by the spirits. She'd been taken from her parents and raised to accomplish a holy and important duty.

She settled down on the warm floor of her wagon as her attendants, Chaeyung and Hwanji, entered. They bowed in ritual postures, then fed her with maipon sticks and spoons—a meal of rice and a stew that had been left on the ground to cook. Yumi sat and swallowed, never so crass as to try to feed herself. This was a ritual, and she was an expert in those.

Though today she couldn't help feeling distracted. It was nineteen days past her nineteenth birthday.

A day for decisions. A day for action.

A day to—maybe—ask for what she wanted?

It was a hundred days until the big festival in Torio City, the grand capital, seat of the queen. The yearly reveal of the country's greatest art, plays, and projects. She had never gone. Perhaps…this time…

Once her attendants finished feeding her, she rose. They opened the door for her, then hopped down out of the private wagon. Yumi took a deep breath, then followed, stepping out into sunlight and down

into her clogs.

Immediately her two attendants leaped to hold up enormous fans, obscuring her from view. Naturally people in the village had gathered to see her. The Chosen. The yoki-hijo. The girl of commanding primal spirits. (Not the most pithy of titles, but it works better in their language.)

This land—the kingdom of Torio—couldn't have been more different from where Painter lived. Not one glowing line—cold or warm—streaked the sky. No apartment buildings. No pavement. Oh, but they had *sunlight*. A dominant red-orange sun, the color of baked clay. Bigger and closer than your sun, it had distinct spots of varied color on it—like a boiling breakfast stew, churning and undulating in the sky.

This scarlet sun painted the landscape…well, perfectly ordinary colors. That's how the brain works. Once you'd been there a few hours, you wouldn't notice the light was a shade redder. But when you first arrived, it would look striking. Like the scene of a bloody massacre everyone is too numb to acknowledge.

Hidden behind her fans, Yumi walked on her clogs through the village to the local cold spring. Once at the spring, her attendants slipped her out of her nightgown—a yoki-hijo did not dress or undress herself—and let her walk down into the slightly cool water, shivering at its shocking kiss. A short time later, Chaeyung and Hwanji followed with a floating plate holding crystalline soaps. They rubbed her once with the first, then she rinsed. Once with the second, then she rinsed. Twice with the third. Three times with the fourth. Five times with the fifth. Eight times with the sixth. Thirteen times with the seventh.

You might think that extreme. If so, have you perhaps never heard of religion?

Yumi's particular flavor of devotion, fortunately, did have some practical accommodations. The later soaps were only such by the broadest definition—you would consider them perfumed creams, with a deliberately moisturizing component. (I find them especially nice on the feet, though I'll probably need them for my whole body once I arrive in the Torish version of hell for abusing their ritual components for bunion relief.)

Yumi's final rinse involved ducking beneath the water for a count of a hundred and forty-four. Underneath, her dark hair flowed around her, writhing in the current of her motion as if alive. The compulsory washing made her hair extremely clean—which was important, as her religious calling forbade her from ever cutting it, so it reached all the way to her waist.

Though it wasn't required of the ritual, Yumi liked to gaze upward through the shimmering water and see if she could find the sun. Fire and water. Liquid and light.

She burst out of the water at the exact count of one forty-four and gasped. That was *supposed* to get easier. She was *supposed* to rise serenely, renewed and reborn. Instead she was forced to break decorum today by coughing a little.

(Yes, she saw coughing as "breaking decorum." Don't even ask how she regarded something truly onerous, like being late for a ritual.)

Ritual bathing done, it was time for the ritual dressing, also carried out by her attendants. The traditional sash under the bust, then the larger white wrap across the chest. Loose undergarment leggings. Then the tobok, in two layers of thick colorful cloth, with a wide bell skirt. Bright magenta, her ritual wear for that day of the week.

She slipped her clogs on again and somehow walked in them, natural and fluid. (I consider myself a reasonably adroit person, but Torish clogs—they call them getuk—feel like bricks tied to my feet. They aren't necessarily hard to balance in—they're only six inches tall—but they grant most outsiders the graceful poise of a drunk chull.)

With all of that, she was at last ready…for her next ritual. In this case, she needed to pray at the village shrine to seek the blessings of the spirits. So she again let her attendants block all view of her with their fans, then walked out and around to the village flower garden.

Here, vibrant blue blossoms—cuplike, to catch the rain—floated on thermals. They hovered around two feet in the air. In Torio, plants rarely dared touch the ground, lest the heat of the stone wither them away. Each flower was maybe two inches across, with wide leaves catching the thermals—like lilies with fine dangling roots that absorbed water from the air. Yumi's passing caused them to swirl and bump against one another.

The shrine was a small structure, wood, mostly open at the sides but with a latticed dome. Remarkably, it *also* floated gracefully a few feet off the ground—this time by way of a single lifting spirit underneath that took the physical shape of two statues, each with grotesque features, facing one another. One vaguely male crouched on the ground; one vaguely female clung to the bottom of the building. Though divided once made physical, they were still part of the same spirit.

Yumi approached among the flowers, the soft thermals causing her skirt to ripple. Thick cloth didn't rise enough to be embarrassing—merely enough to give shape and flare to the bell of her outfit. She removed her clogs once more as she reached the shrine, stepping up onto the cool wood. It barely wobbled, held firm by the strength of the spirit.

She knelt, then began the first of the thirteen ritual prayers. Now, if you think my description of her preparations took a while, that's intentional. It might help you understand—in the slightest way—Yumi's life. Because this wasn't a special day, in terms of her duties. This was *typical*. Ritual eating. Ritual bathing. Ritual dressing. Ritual prayers. And more. Yumi was one of the Chosen, picked at birth, granted the ability to influence the hijo, the spirits. It was an enormous honor among her people. And they never let her forget it.

The prayers and following meditations took around an hour. When she finished, she looked up toward the sun, slots in the shrine's wooden canopy decorating her in alternating lines of light and shadow. She felt…lucky. Yes, she was certain that was the proper emotion. She was blessed to hold this station, one of the very fortunate few.

The world the spirits provided was wonderful. The sun of vivid red-orange shining through brilliant clouds of yellow, scarlet, violet. A field of hovering flowers, trembling as tiny lizards leaped from one to another. The stone underneath, warm and vibrant, the source of all life, heat, and growth.

She was a part of this. A vital one.

Surely this was wonderful.

Surely this was all that she should ever need.

Surely she couldn't want *more*. Even if…even if today was lucky. Even if…perhaps, for once, she could ask?

The festival, she thought. *I could visit, wearing the clothing of an ordinary person. One day to be normal.*

Rustling cloth and the sound of wooden shoes on stone caused Yumi to turn. Only one person would dare approach her during meditation: Liyun, a tall woman in a severe black tobok with a white bow. Liyun, her kihomaban—a word that meant something between a guardian and a sponsor. We'll use the term "warden" for simplicity.

Liyun halted a few steps from the shrine, hands behind her back. Ostensibly she waited upon Yumi's pleasure, a servant to the girl of commanding primal spirits. (Trust me, the term grows on you.) Yet there was a certain demanding air even to the way Liyun *stood*.

Perhaps it was the fashionable shoes: clogs with thick wood beneath her toes, but sleek heels behind. Perhaps it was the way she wore her hair: cut short in the rear, longer in the front—evoking the shape of a blade at each side of her head. This wasn't a woman whose time you could waste, somehow including when she *wasn't* waiting for you.

Yumi quickly rose. "Is it time, Warden-nimi?" she said, with enormous respect.

Yumi's and Painter's languages shared a common root, and in both there was a certain affectation I find hard to express in your tongue. They could conjugate sentences, or add modifiers to words, to indicate praise or derision. Interestingly, no curses or swears existed among them. They would simply change a word to its lowest form instead. I'll do my best to indicate this nuance by adding the words "highly" or "lowly" in certain key locations.

"The time has not quite arrived, Chosen," Liyun said. "We should wait for the steamwell's eruption."

Of course. The air was renewed then; better to wait if it was near. But that meant they had time. A few precious moments with no scheduled work or ceremony.

"Warden-nimi," Yumi said (highly), gathering her courage. "The Festival of Reveals. It is near."

"A hundred days, yes."

"And it is a thirteenth year," Yumi said. "The hijo will be unusually active. We will not…petition them that day, I assume?"

"I suppose we won't, Chosen," Liyun said, checking the little calendar—in the form of a small book—that she kept in her pouch. She flipped a few pages.

"We'll be…near Torio City? We've been traveling in the region."

"And?"

"And…I…" Yumi bit her lip.

"Ah…" Liyun said. "You would like to spend the festival day in prayer of thanks to the spirits for granting you such an elevated station."

Just say it, a part of her whispered. *Just say no. That's not what you want. Tell her.*

Liyun snapped her book closed, watching Yumi. "Surely," she said, "that *is* what you want. You wouldn't actively desire to do something that would *embarrass* your station. To imply you regret your place. Would you, Chosen?"

"Never," Yumi whispered.

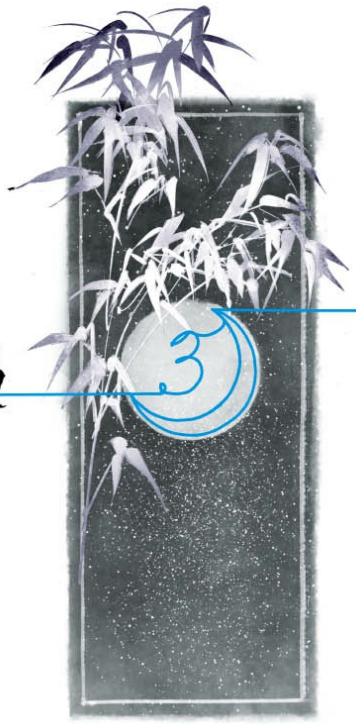
"You were honored, of all the children born that year," Liyun said, "to be given this calling, these powers. One of only *fourteen* currently living."

"I know."

"You are *special*."

She would have preferred to be less special—but she felt guilty the moment she thought it.

"I understand," Yumi said, steeling herself. "Let us not wait for the steamwell. Please, lead me to the place of ritual. I am eager to begin my duties and call the spirits."



Chapter 3

IT'S TERRIFYING HOW nightmares transform.

I'm talking about ordinary nightmares now, not the kind that get painted. Terror dreams—they change. They evolve. It's bad enough to encounter something frightening in the waking world, but at least those mortal horrors have shape, substance. That which has shape can be understood. That which has mass can be destroyed.

Nightmares are a fluid terror. Once you get the briefest handle on one, it will change. Filling nooks in the soul like spilled water filling cracks in the floor. Nightmares are a seeping chill, created by the mind to punish itself. In this, a nightmare is the very definition of masochism. Most of us are modest enough to keep that sort of thing tucked away, hidden.

On Painter's world, those dark bits were strikingly prone to coming alive.

He stood at the edge of the city—bathed from behind in radioactive teal and electric magenta—and stared out at the churning darkness. It had substance; it shifted and flowed similar to molten tar.

The shroud. The blackness beyond.

Nightmares unformed.

Trains traveled the hion lines to places like the small town where his family still lived, a couple of hours away. He *knew* other places existed. Yet it was difficult not to feel isolated while looking into that endless blackness.

It stayed away from the hion lines. Mostly.

He turned and walked the street outside the city for a short time. To his right, those outer buildings rose as a shield wall, with narrow alleyways between. As I said before, it wasn't a true fortification. Walls didn't stop nightmares; a wall would merely prevent people from stepping out onto the

perimeter.

In Painter's experience, no one came out here but his kind. The ordinary people stayed indoors; even one street farther inward felt infinitely safer. The people lived as he once had, trying hard not to think about what was out there. Seething. Churning. Watching.

These days, it was his job to confront it.

He didn't spot anything at first—no signs of particularly brave nightmares encroaching upon the city. Those could be subtle, however. So Painter continued. His assigned beat was a small wedge that began several blocks inward of the perimeter, but the outside portion was the widest—and the most likely place for signs of nightmares to appear.

As he did his rounds, he continued to imagine that he was some lone warrior. Instead of, essentially, an exterminator who had gone to art school.

To his right he passed the capstone paintings. He wasn't certain where the local painters had come up with the idea, but these days—during dull moments on patrol—they tended to do practice work on the outer buildings of the city. The walls facing the shroud didn't have windows. So they made for large inviting canvases.

Not strictly part of the job, each was a certain personal statement. He passed Akane's painting, depicting an expansive flower. Black paint on the whitewashed wall. His own spot was two buildings over. Just a blank white wall, though if you looked closely you could see the failed project beneath peeking through. He decided to whitewash it again. But not tonight, because he caught signs of a nightmare at last.

He stepped closer to the shroud, but didn't touch it of course. Yes…the black surface here was disturbed. Like paint that had been touched when near to drying, it was…upset, rippling. It was difficult to make out, as the shroud didn't reflect light, unlike the ink or tar it otherwise appeared to be. But Painter had trained well.

Something had emerged from the shroud here and started into the city. He retrieved his brush, a tool as long as a sword, from his large painter's bag. He felt better with it in hand. He shifted his bag to his back, feeling the weight of the canvases and ink jar inside. Then he struck inward—passing the whitewashed wall that obscured his latest failure.

He'd tried four times. This last one had gotten further than most of his attempts. A painting of the star, which he'd started after hearing the news of an upcoming voyage intended to travel the darkness of the sky. A trip to the star itself, for which scientists planned to use a special vessel and a pair of hion lines launched an incredible distance.

In this, Painter had learned something interesting. Contrary to what everyone had once assumed, the star wasn't merely a spot of light in the sky. Telescopes revealed it was a *planet*. Occupied, according to their best guess, by other people. A place whose light somehow cut through the shroud.

The news of the impending trip had briefly inspired him. But he'd lost that spark, and the painting had languished. How long had it been since he'd covered it over? At least a month.

On the corner of the wall near the painting, he picked out steaming blackness. The nightmare had passed this way and brushed the stone, leaving residue that evaporated slowly, shedding black tendrils into the night. He'd expected it to take this path; they almost always took the most direct way into the city. It was good to confirm it nonetheless.

Painter crept inward, reentering the realm of the twin hion lights. Laughter echoed from somewhere to his right, but the nightmare probably hadn't gone that direction. The pleasure district was where people went to do anything *other* than sleep.

There, he thought, picking out black wisps on a planter up ahead. The shrub grew toward the hion

lines and their nourishing light. So as Painter moved down the empty roadway, he walked between plants that looked as if they were reaching arms up in silent salute.

The next sign came near an alley. An actual footprint, black, steaming dark vapors. The nightmare had begun evolving, picking up on human thoughts, changing from formless blackness to something with a shape. Only a vague one at first, but instead of being a slinking, flowing black thing, it probably had feet now. Even in that form they rarely left footprints, so he was fortunate to have found one.

He moved onto a darker street, where the hion lines were fine and thin overhead. In this shadowy place, he remembered his first nights working alone. Despite extensive training, despite mentorship with three different painters, he'd felt exposed and raw—like a fresh scrape exposed to the air, his emotions and fear close to the surface.

These days, fear was layered well beneath calluses of experience. Still, he gripped his shoulder bag tightly in one hand and held his brush out as he crept along. There, on the wall, was a handprint with too-long fingers and what looked like claws. Yes, it *was* taking a form. Its prey must be close.

Farther along the narrow alley, by a bare wall, he found the nightmare: a thing of ink and shadow some seven feet tall. It had fashioned two long arms that bent too many times, the elongated palms pressed against the wall, fingers spread. Its head had sunk *through* the stone to peek into the room beyond.

The tall ones always unnerved him, particularly when they had long fingers. He felt he'd seen figures like that in his own fragmented dreams—figments of terrors buried within. His feet scraped the stones, and the thing heard and withdrew its head, wisps of formless blackness rising from it like ash from a smoldering fire.

No face though. They never had faces—not unless something was going very wrong. Instead they usually displayed a deeper blackness on the front of the head. One that *dripped* dark liquid. Like tears, or wax near a flame.

Painter immediately raised his mental protections, thinking calm thoughts. This was the first and most important training. The nightmares, like many predators that fed on minds, could sense thoughts and emotions. They searched for the most powerful, raw ones to feed upon. A placid mind was of little interest.

The thing turned and put its head through the wall again. This building had no windows, which was foolish. Nightmares could ignore walls. In removing windows, the occupants trapped themselves more fully in the boxes of their homes, feeding their claustrophobia—and making the jobs of the painters more difficult.

Painter moved carefully, slowly, taking a canvas—a good three-foot by three-foot piece of thick cloth on a frame—from his shoulder bag. He set it on the ground in front of him. His jar of ink followed—black and runny. Nightmare painters always worked in black on white, no colors, as you wanted something that mimicked the look of a nightmare. The ink blend was designed to give excellent gradations in the grey and black. Not that Painter bothered with that much nuance these days.

He dipped the brush in the ink and knelt above his canvas, then paused, gazing at the nightmare. The blackness continued to steam off it, and its shape was still fairly indistinct. This was probably only its first or second trip into the city. It took a good dozen trips before a nightmare had enough substance to be dangerous—and they had to return to the shroud each time to renew, lest they evaporate away.

Judging by its appearance, this one was fairly new. It probably couldn't hurt him.

Probably.

And here was the crux of why painters were so important, yet so disposable. Their job was

essential, but not *urgent*. As long as a nightmare was discovered within its first ten or so trips into the city, it could be neutralized. That almost always happened.

Painter was good at controlling his fear with thoughts like these. That was part of his training—very pragmatic. Once his breathing calmed, he tried to consider what the nightmare looked like, what its shape *could* have been. Supposedly if you picked something that the entity already resembled, then painted that, you would have more power over it. He had trouble with this. Or rather, during the last few months it had felt like more trouble than it was worth.

So today he settled on the shape of a small bamboo thicket and began painting. The thing had spindly arms, after all. Those were kind of like bamboo.

He'd practiced a great number of bamboo stalks. In fact, you could say that Painter had a certain scientific precision in the way he drew each segment—a little sideways flourish at the start, followed by a long line. You let the brush linger a moment so that when you raised it, the blot the brush left formed the end knob of the bamboo segment. You could create each in a single stroke.

It was efficient, and these days that seemed most important to him. As he painted, he fixed the shape in his mind—a central powerful image. As usual such deliberate thought drew the thing's attention. It hesitated, then pulled its head out from the wall and turned in his direction, its face dripping its own ink.

It moved toward him, walking on its arms, but those had grown more round. With knobbed segments.

Painter continued. Stroke. Flourish. Leaves made with quick flips of the brush, blacker than the main body of the bamboo. Similar protrusions appeared on the arms of the thing as it drew closer. It also shrank in upon itself as he painted a pot at the bottom.

The painting captured the thing. Diverted it. So that by the time it reached him, the transformation was fully in effect.

He never lost himself in the painting these days. After all, he told himself, he had a job to do. And he did that job well. As he finished, the thing even adopted some of the sounds of bamboo—the soft rattle of stalks beating against one another to accompany the omnipresent buzz of the hion lines above.

He lifted his brush, leaving a perfect bamboo painting on his canvas, mimicked by the thing in the alley, leaves brushing the walls. Then, with a sound very much like a sigh, the nightmare dispersed. He'd deliberately transformed it into a harmless shape—and now, trapped as it was, it couldn't flee to the shroud to regain strength. Instead, like water trapped on a hot plate, it just…evaporated.

Soon Painter was alone in the alley. He packed up his things, sliding the canvas back into the large bag, alongside three unused ones. Then he returned to his patrol.

Chapter 1

THE LOCAL STEAMWELL erupted right as Yumi was passing—at a safe distance—on the way to the place of ritual.

A glorious jet of water ascended from the hole in the center of the village. A furious, superheated cascade that reached forty feet at its highest—a gift from the spirits deep below. This water was vital; rain was scarce in Torio, and rivers…well, one can imagine what the superheated ground did to prospective rivers. Water wasn't *rare* in Yumi's land, but it was concentrated, centralized, elevated.

The air nearest the steamwells was humid, nourishing migratory plants and other lively entities. You often found clouds above the steamwells, offering shade and occasional rainfall. The water that didn't escape as steam rained down on large bronze trays set up in six concentric rings around the geyser. Elevated from the ground to keep them cool, the metal funneled the water down the slope toward the nearby homes. There were some sixty of those in the town—with room to grow, judging by how much water the steamwell released.

The homes were built a good distance back, of course. Steamwells were vital to life in this land, yes, but it was best not to fraternize.

Farther out from the city were the searing barrens. Wastelands where the ground was too hot even for plants; the stone there could set clogs afire and kill travelers who lingered. In Torio you traveled only at night, and only upon hovering wagons pulled by flying devices created by the spirits. Needless to say, most people stayed home.

The loud pelting of drops against metal basins drowned out the murmurs of the watching crowds. Bathing finished, prayers proffered, Yumi could now be gawked at officially, so her attendants followed with fans withdrawn.

She kept her eyes lowered, and she walked with a practiced step—a yoki-hijo must glide, as if a spirit. She was glad for the sound of the steamwell, for though she didn't dare *mind* the whispers and murmurs of awe, they did sometimes…overwhelm. She quickly reminded herself that the people's awe wasn't for *her*, but for her calling. She needed to remember that, needed to banish pride and remain reserved. She most certainly needed to avoid anything embarrassing—like smiling. Out of reverence for her station.

The station, in return, did not notice. As is the case with many things that people revere.

She passed homes, most of which were in two tiers: One section built upon the ground to benefit from the warmth and heat. Another built on stilts, with air underneath to keep it cooler. Imagine two large planter boxes built against one another, one elevated four feet, the other resting on the ground. Most of them had a stocky tree or two—about eight feet from the tips of their branches to the bottom of their wide, webbed roots—chained to them, riding the thermals a few feet in the air.

Lighter plants hovered high in the sky, casting variegated shadows. During the daytime, you found low plants solely in spots like gardens, where the ground was cooler. That and places where humans worked to keep them nearby, so they didn't float away, or get float*ed* away. Torio is the only land I've ever heard of with tree rustlers.

(Yes, there's more to the flying than the thermals alone. Even in Torio the trees are made of heavy wood. So they need specific local adaptations to float. But we're not going to get into it right now.)

At the far side of the town was the kimomakkin, or—as we'll phrase it in this story—the place of ritual. A village usually had only one, lest the spirits get jealous of one another. A few flowers floated nearby, and when Yumi entered, her passing caused them to eddy and spin in her wake. They immediately shot up high into the sky. The place of ritual was a section of extra-hot stone, though not nearly on the level of the outlands.

(If you've ever been to the Reshi Isles, where sand lines the beaches on bright and sweltering summer days, you might have a frame of reference. The stones in the place of ritual felt the same as walking across that beach sand on a particularly sunny day. Hot enough to hurt, but not so hot as to be deadly.)

In Torio, heat was sacred. The village people gathered outside the fence, their clogs scraping stone, parents lifting children. Three local spirit scribes settled on tall stools to sing songs that, best I can tell, the spirits never noticed. (I approve of the job nonetheless. Anything to gainfully employ more musicians. It's not that we're unable to do anything else; it's more that if you don't find something productive for us to do, we'll generally start asking questions like, "Hey, why aren't they worshipping *me*?")

Everyone waited outside the small fenced portion of ground, including Liyun. The songs started: a rhythmic chanting accompanying a percussion of sticks on paddle drums, a flute in the background, all of it growing more audible as the steamwell finished relieving itself and stumbled off to sleep.

Inside the place of ritual was only Yumi.

The spirits deep underground.

And a whole lot of rocks.

The villagers spent months gathering them, setting them throughout the city, then deliberating over which ones had the best shapes. You may think your local pastimes are boring, and the things your parents always forced you to do mind-numbing, but at least you didn't spend your days excited by the prospect of ranking rock shapes.

Yumi put on a pair of kneepads, then knelt in the center of the rocks, spreading her skirts—which rippled and rose in the thermals. Normally you did not want your skin that close to the ground. Here,

there was something almost intimate about kneeling. Spirits gathered in warm places. Or rather, warmth was a sign they were near.

They were unseen as of yet. You had to draw them forth—but they wouldn't come to the beck of just anyone. You needed someone like Yumi. You needed a girl who could call to the spirits. There were many viable methods, but they shared a common theme: creativity. Most self-aware Invested beings—be they called fay, seon, or spirit—respond to this fundamental aspect of human nature in one way or another.

Something from nothing. Creation.

Beauty from raw materials. Art.

Order from chaos. Organization.

Or in this case, all three at once. Each yoki-hijo trained in an ancient and powerful art. A deliberate, wondrous artistry requiring the full synergy of body and mind. Geological reorganization on the microscale, requiring acute understanding of gravitational equilibrium.

In other words, they stacked rocks.

Yumi selected one with an interesting shape and carefully balanced it on end, then removed her hands and left it standing—oblong, looking like it *should* fall. The crowd gasped, though nothing arcane or mystical was on display. The art was a product of instinct and practice. She placed a second stone on the first, then two on top at once—balancing them against one another in a way that looked impossible. The contrasting stones—one leaning out to the right, the other precariously resting on its left tip—remained steady as she pulled her hands away.

There was a deliberate reverence to the way Yumi positioned rocks—seeming to cradle them for a moment, stilling them like a mother with a sleeping child. Then she'd withdraw her hands and leave the rocks as if one breath from collapse. It wasn't magic. But it was certainly magical.

The crowd ate it up. If you find their fascination to be odd, well…I'm not going to disagree. It *is* a little strange. Not merely the balancing, but the way her people treated the performances—and creations—of the yoki-hijo as the greatest possible triumphs of artistry.

But then again, there's nothing intrinsically valuable about *any* kind of art. That's not me complaining or making light. It's one of the most wonderful aspects to art—the fact that *people* decide what is beautiful. We don't get to decide what is food and what is not. (Yes, exceptions exist. Don't be pedantic. When you pass those marbles, we're all going to laugh.) But we *absolutely* get to decide what counts as art.

If Yumi's people wanted to declare that rock arrangements surpassed painting or sculpture as an artistic creation…well, I personally found it fascinating.

The spirits agreed.

Today Yumi created a spiral, using the artist's sequence of progress as a kind of loose structure. You might know it by a different name. One, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four. Then back down. The piles of twenty or thirty rocks should have been the most impressive—and indeed, the fact that she could stack them so well is incredible. But she found ways to make the stacks of five or three delight just as much. Incongruous mixes of tiny rocks, with enormous ones balanced on top. Shingled patterns of stones, oblong ones hanging out precariously to the sides. Stones as long as her forearm balanced on their tiniest tips.

From the mathematical descriptions, and the use of the artist's sequence, you might have assumed the process to be methodical. Calculating. Yet it felt more a feat of organic improvisation than it did one of engineering prowess. Yumi swayed as she stacked, moving to the beats of the drums. She'd close her eyes, swimming her head from side to side as she *felt* the stones grind beneath her fingers.

Judged their weights, the way they tipped.

Yumi didn't want to simply accomplish the task. She didn't want merely to perform for the whispering, excitable audience. She wanted to be worthy. She wanted to sense the spirits and know what they desired of her.

She felt they deserved so much better than her. Someone who did more than she could, even at her best. Someone who didn't secretly yearn for freedom. Someone who didn't—deep down—reject the incredible gift she'd been given.

Over the course of several hours, the sculpture grew into a brilliant spiral of dozens of stacks. Yumi outlasted the drumming women, who fell off after about two hours. She continued as people took children home for naps, or slipped away to eat. She went on so long that Liyun had to duck out to use the facilities, then hastily return.

Those watching could appreciate the sculpture, of course. But the best place to view it was from above. Or below. Imagine a great swirl made up of stacked stones, evoking the feeling of blowing wind, spiraling, yet made entirely from rock. Order from chaos. Beauty from raw materials. Something from nothing. The spirits noticed.

In record numbers, they noticed.

As Yumi persevered through scraped fingers and aching muscles, spirits began to float up from the stones beneath. Teardrop shaped, radiant like the sun—a swirling red and blue—and the size of a person's head. They'd rise up and settle next to Yumi, watching her progress, transfixed. They didn't have eyes—they were little more than blobs—but they could watch. Sense, at least.

Spirits of this sort find human creations to be fascinating. And here, because of what she'd done—because of who she was—they knew this sculpture was a gift. As the day grew dark and the plants began to drift down from the upper layers of the sky, Yumi finally started to weaken. By now her fingers were bloodied—the calluses scraped away by repetitive movement. Her arms had gone from sore to numb, to somehow both sore *and* numb.

It was time for the next step. She couldn't afford a childish mistake like she'd suffered in her early years: that of working so hard that she collapsed unconscious before binding the spirits. This wasn't simply about creating the sculpture or providing a pious display. Like a fine-print rider in a contract, there was a measure of practicality attached to this day's art.

Too tired to stand, Yumi turned from her creation—which contained hundreds of stones. Then she blinked, counting the spirits who surrounded her in their glory—in this case they looked a bit like a series of overly large ice cream scoops that had tumbled from the cone.

Thirty-seven.

She'd summoned *thirty-seven*.

Most yoki-hijo were lucky to get six. Her previous record had been twenty.

Yumi wiped the sweat from her brow, then counted again through blurry eyes. She was tired. So (lowly) tired.

"Send forth," she said, her voice croaking, "the first supplicant."

The crowd agitated with excitement, and people went running to fetch friends or family members who had fallen off during the hours of sculpting. A strict order of needs was kept in the town, adjudicated by methods Yumi didn't know. Supplicants were arranged, with the lucky five or six at the top all but guaranteed a slot.

Those lower down would usually have to wait for another visit to see to their needs. As spirits typically remained bound for five to ten years—with their effectiveness waning in the latter part of that—there was always a grand need for the efforts of the yoki-hijo. Today, for example, had begun

with twenty-three names on the list, though they'd expected only a half dozen spirits.

As one might imagine, there was a fervor among the members of the town council to fill out the rest of the names. Yumi was unaware of this. She merely positioned herself at the front of the place of ritual, kneeling, head bowed—and trying her best not to collapse sideways to the stone.

Liyun allowed the first supplicant in, a man with a head that sat a little too far forward on his neck, like a picture that had been cut in half and then sloppily taped together. "Blessed bringer of spirits," he said, wringing his cap in his hands, "we need light for my home. It has been six years that we have been without."

Six years? Without a light at night? Suddenly, Yumi felt *more* selfish for her attempt to escape her duties earlier. "I am sorry," she whispered back, "for failing you and your family these many years."

"You didn't—" The man cut himself off. It wasn't proper to contradict a yoki-hijo. Even to compliment them.

Yumi turned to the first of the spirits, who inched up beside her, curious. "Light," she said. "Please. In exchange for this gift of mine, will you give us light?" At the same time, she projected the proper idea. Of a flaming sun becoming a small glowing orb, capable of being carried in the palm of her hand.

"Light," the spirit said to her. "Yes."

The man waited anxiously as the spirit shivered, then divided in half—one side glowing brightly with a friendly orange color, the other becoming a dull blue sphere so dark it could be mistaken for black, particularly at dusk.

Yumi handed the man the two balls, each fitting in the palm of one hand. He bowed and retreated. The next requested a repelling pair, as was used in the garden veranda, to lift her small dairy into the air so that it would stay cooler and she could make butter. Yumi complied, speaking to the next spirit in line, coaxing it to split into the shape of two squat statues with grimacing features.

Each supplicant in turn got their request fulfilled. It had been years since Yumi had accidentally confused or frightened off a spirit—though these people didn't know that, and so each waited in worried anticipation, fearing that their request would be one where the spirit turned away.

It didn't happen, though each request took longer to fulfill, each spirit longer to persuade, as they grew more detached from her performance. Plus, each request took a little…something from Yumi. Something that recovered over time, but in the moment left her feeling empty. Like a jar of citron tea being devoured spoonful by spoonful.

Some wanted light. A few wanted repelling devices. The majority requested flyers—hovering devices about two feet across. These could be used to help care for crops during the daytime, when the plants soared out of reach of the farmers and needed to be watched by the village's great crows instead. There were some threats the crows could not manage, so flyers were a necessity for most settlements. As always, the spirit split into two to make the devices—in this case a machine with great insectile wings, and a handheld device to control it from the ground.

One could make basically anything out of a spirit, provided it was willing and you could formulate the request properly. To Torish people, using a spirit for light was as natural—and as common—as spheres are for you, and candles or lanterns are on other worlds. You might consider the Torish wasteful of the great cosmic power afforded them, but theirs was a harsh land where the ground could literally boil water. You'll have to forgive them for making use of the resources they had.

Getting through all thirty-seven spirits was nearly as grueling as the art itself—and by the end, Yumi continued in a daze. Barely seeing, barely hearing. Mumbling ceremonial phrases by rote and projecting to the spirits more with primal need than crisp images. But eventually, the last supplicant

bowed and hurried away with his new spirit saw. Yumi found herself alone before her creation, surrounded by cooling air and floating lilies that were drifting down to her level as the thermals cooled.

Done. She was…done?

Her sculpture would be allowed to fade with time as all art does, and eventually would be taken down before the next visit of a yoki-hijo to this town. The power of the devices created in the ritual would eventually weaken, each spirit's bond remaining in effect for a different length of time. But in general, the more spirits you bound in a session, the longer all of them would last. What she had done today was unprecedented.

Liyun approached to offer congratulations. She found, however, not a magnificent master of spirits—but an exhausted nineteen-year-old girl, collapsed unconscious, her hair fanning around her on the stone and her ceremonial silks trembling in the breeze.

THE NIGHTMARES HAD originally come from the sky.

Painter had heard the accounts. Everyone had. They weren't *quite* histories, mind you. They were fragments of stories that were likely exaggerations. They were taught in school regardless. Like a man with diarrhea in a sandpaper factory, sometimes all available options are less than ideal. One account read:

> I watched it rain the blood of a dying god. I crawled through tar that took the faces of the people I had loved. It took them. Their blood became black ink.

Those are the words of a poet who, after the event, didn't speak or even write for thirty years. Years later, another woman wrote:

> Grandfather spoke of the nightmares. He doesn't know why he was spared. He stares at nothing when he tells of those days spent crawling in the darkness, that terror from the sky, until he found another voice. They met and huddled, weeping together, clinging to one another—although they had never met before that day, they were suddenly brothers. Because they were real.

And then this one, which I find most unnerving of them all:

> It will take me. It creeps under the barrier. It knows I am here.

That was found roughly a hundred years later, painted on the wall of a cave. No bones were ever located.

The accounts are sparse, fragmentary, and feverish. You'll need to forgive the people who left them; they were busy surviving an all-out societal collapse. By Painter's time, it had been seventeen centuries—and as far as they were concerned, the blackness of the shroud was normal.

They'd only survived because of the hion: the lights that drove back the shroud. The energy by which a new society had been forged—or, in the parlance of the locals, painted anew. But this new world required dealing with the nightmares, one way or another.

"Another bamboo?" Foreman Sukishi said, sliding the top canvas from Painter's bag.

"Bamboo works," Painter said. "Why change if it works?"

"It's lazy," Sukishi replied.

Painter shrugged. The small room where he turned in his paintings after his shift was lit by a hanging chandelier. If you touch opposite lines of hion to either side of a piece of metal, you can make it heat up. From there, you're barely a little sideways skip away from the incandescent bulb. As I said, not everything in the city was teal or magenta—though the hion overhead outside obviated a need for streetlights of any other color.

Sukishi marked a tally by Painter's name in the ledger. There wasn't a strict quota—everyone knew that encountering nightmares was random, and there were more than enough painters. On average, you'd find one nightmare a night—but sometimes you went days without seeing a single one.

They still kept track. Too long without a painting to turn in, and questions would be asked. Now, the more lazy among you might notice a hole in this system. In theory, the rigorous training required to become a painter was supposed to weed out the sort of person who would paint random things without actually encountering any nightmares. But there *was* a reason Sukishi hesitated and narrowed his eyes at Painter after retrieving the second canvas and revealing a *second* bamboo painting.

"Bamboo works," Painter repeated.

"You need to look at the *shape* of the nightmare," Sukishi said. "You need to match your drawing to *that*, changing the natural form of the nightmare into something innocent, nonthreatening. You should only be drawing bamboo if the nightmares you encounter *look* like bamboo."

"They did."

Sukishi glared at him, and the old man had an impressive glare. Some facial expressions, like miso, require aging to hit their potency.

Painter feigned indifference, taking his wages for the day and stepping out onto the street. He slung his bag over his shoulder—with his tools and remaining canvases—and went searching for some dinner.

The Noodle Pupil was the sort of corner restaurant where you could make noise. A place where you weren't afraid to slurp as you sucked down your dinner, where your table's laughter wasn't embarrassing because it mixed like paint with that coming from the next one over. Though less busy on the "night" shift than during the "day," it was somehow loud even when it was quiet.

Painter hovered outside the place like a mote of dust in the light, seeking somewhere to land. The younger painters from his class congregated here with the sort of frequency that earned them their own unspoken booths and tables. A double line of hion outlined the broad picture window in the front, glowing, making it appear like a futuristic screen. Those same lines rose like vines above the window, spelling out the name in teal and magenta, with a giant bowl of noodles on top.

(Technically, I was a part owner of that noodle shop. What? Renowned interdimensional storytellers can't invest in a little real estate now and then?)

Painter stood on the street, absorbing the laughter like a tree soaking up the light of hion. Eventually he lowered his head and ducked inside, looping his large shoulder bag on one of the prongs of the coatrack without looking. Fifteen other painters occupied the place, congregated around three tables. Akane's place was in the back, where she was adjusting her hair. Tojin knelt low beside a nearby table, solemnly adjudicating a noodle-eating contest between two other young men.

Painter sat at the bar. He was, after all, a solitary defense against the miasma outside the city. A lone warrior. He preferred eating by himself, obviously. He wouldn't have stopped in, save for his tragic mortality. Even solemn, edgy warriors against darkness needed noodles now and then.

The restaurant's manager flitted over behind the bar, then folded her arms and kind of hunched as she stood, mimicking his pose. Finally he looked up.

"Hey, Design," he said. "Um…can I have the usual?"

"Your usual is so usual!" she said. "Do you want to know a secret? If you order something new, I'll write it down and wrap it up, then put it in your noodles. But I'll also tell you what it is, because the paper will get soggy in the noodles, and you won't be able to read it."

"Uh…" Painter said. "The usual. Please?"

"Politeness," she said, pointing at him, "*accepted*."

Design…did not do a good job acting human. I take no blame, as she repeatedly refused my counsel on the matter. At least her disguise was holding up. People did wonder why the strange noodle-shop woman had long white hair, despite appearing to be in her early twenties. She wore tight dresses, and many of the painters had crushes on her. She insisted, you see, that I make her disguise particularly striking.

Or, well, I should say it in her words: "Make me pretty so they'll be extra disturbed if my face ever unravels. And give me voluptuous curves, because they remind me of a graphed cosine. And also because boobs look fun."

It wasn't an *actual* body—we all kind of learned our lesson on that—but rather a complicated wireframe Lightweaving with force projections attached directly to her cognitive element as it manifested in the physical realm. But as I was getting pretty good at the technical side of all this, you can pretend it functioned the same as flesh and blood.

I'll admit to some pride regarding the way Painter's eyes followed Design as she walked over to begin preparing his meal. Granted, he did overdo it—his eyes lingered on her the entire time she worked. Don't judge him too harshly. He was nineteen, and I'm a uniquely talented artist.

Design soon returned with his bowl of noodles, which she set into a circular nook carved into the wood. The hion lines—one connected to either end of the bar—ran heat through the element at the bottom of the bowl to keep the broth warm on chill Kilahito nights.

From behind, laughter and chanting picked up as the noodle competition progressed. Painter, in turn, broke his maipon sticks apart and ate slowly, in a dignified way, as befitted one of his imaginary station.

"Design," he said, trying not to slurp too loud. "Is…what I'm doing important?"

"Of course it is," she said, lounging down across the bar from him. "If you all didn't *eat* the noodles, I think I'd run out of places to store them."

"No," he said, waving to his bag where it hung from one arm of the restaurant's curiously shaped coatrack. "I mean being a nightmare painter. It's an important job, right?"

"Uh, yeah," Design said. "Obviously. Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a place with no nightmare painters. Then the people got eaten. It's a short story."

"I mean, I know it's important in *general*," Painter said. "But…is what *I'm* doing important?"

Design leaned forward across the bar, and he met her eyes. Which was difficult for him, considering her current posture. That said, you may have heard of her kind. I suggest, if you have the option, that you avoid trying to meet a Cryptic's gaze. Their features—when undisguised—bend space and time, and have been known to lead to acute bouts of madness in those who try to make sense of them. Then again, who hasn't wanted to flip off linear continuity now and then, eh?

"I see what you're saying," she told him.

"You do?" he asked.

"Yes. Noodles seven percent off tonight. In respect for your brave painting services."

It…wasn't what he'd been talking about. But he nodded in thanks anyway. Because he was a young person working a vitally important, relatively low-paying job. Seven percent was seven percent.

(Design, it should be noted, only gave discounts in prime number increments. Because, and I quote, "I have standards." Still not sure what she meant.)

She turned to see to another customer, so Painter continued slurping down the long noodles in the warm, savory broth. The dish was quite good. Best in the city, according to some people, which isn't that surprising. If there's one thing you can count on a Cryptic to do, it's follow a list of instructions with strict precision. Design had little vials of seasoning she added to the broth, each one counted to the exact number of grains of salt.

Halfway through the meal, Akane stepped up to the bar, and Painter glanced away. She was gone a moment later, carrying festive drinks to the others.

He ate the rest of the noodles in silence. "Rice?" Design asked when she noticed he was almost done.

"Yes, please."

She added a scoop to soak up the rest of the broth, and he scarfed it down.

"You could go talk to them," Design said softly, wiping the counter with a rag.

"I tried befriending them in school. It didn't go well."

"People grow up. It's one of the things that makes them different from rocks. You should—"

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm a loner, Design. You think I care what others think of me?"

She cocked her head, squinting with one eye. "Is that a trick question? Because you *obviously*—"

"How much?" he said. "With the discount?"

She sighed. "Six."

"Six? A bowl normally costs two hundred kon."

"Ninety-seven percent off," she said. "Because you need it, Painter. You sure about this? I could go talk to them, tell them that you're lonely. Why don't I go do it right now?"

He laid a ten-kon coin on the counter, with a quick bow of thanks. Before she could push him further to do something that was probably good for him, he grabbed his bag from among the others hanging on the rack. He'd always found the statue coatrack a strange addition to the restaurant. But it *was* a quirky place. So why not have a coatrack in the shape of a man with hawkish features and a sly smile?

(Unfortunately, I had been quite aware of my surroundings when my ailment first struck. I had screamed inside when Design—thinking me too creepy otherwise—spray-painted me copper. Then, ever practical, she'd added a crown with spikes on it for holding hats, and several large bandoliers with poles on them for holding bags or coats.

As I said, I owned the restaurant. Part owner at least. Design ransacked my pockets for the money to build the place. I didn't run it though. You can't do that when you've been frozen in time. For your information, I have it on good authority that I made an excellent coatrack. I prefer not to think of it as an undignified disposal of my person, but rather as pulling off an incredible disguise.)

Painter stepped outside, heart thumping. A passing shower of rain had left puddles and given the street a reflective sheen—lines of light hanging above, their reflections ghosts beneath the ground.

Painter breathed in, and out, and in again. Having fled from Design's offers, he found it difficult to maintain the pretense. He knew he wasn't a loner. He wasn't some proud knight fighting the darkness for honor's sake. He wasn't important, interesting, or even personable. He was just one of likely *thousands* of unremarkable boys without the courage to do anything notable—and worse, without the skill to go underappreciated.

It was an unfair assessment of himself. But he thought it anyway, and found it difficult to stomach. Difficult enough that he wanted to retreat toward his easy lies of self-imposed solitude and noble

sacrifice. But a part of him was beginning to find those attitudes silly. Cringeworthy. That left him afraid. Without the illusion, how would he keep going?

With a sigh, he started off toward his apartment, his large painter's bag across his shoulder and resting against his back. At the first intersection though, he spotted a telltale sign: wisps of darkness curling off a brick at the corner. A nightmare had passed this way recently.

That wasn't *too* surprising. This was the poorer section of town near the perimeter. Nightmares came through here with some regularity. Another painter would find this one eventually; he was off shift. Hands in pockets, absorbed by his personal discontent, Painter walked on past the corner. If he hurried home, he could catch the opening of his favorite drama on the hion viewer.

Another light rain blew through the city, playing soft percussion on the street, making the reflected lines dance to the beat. Those dark wisps began to fade from the corner brick, the trail going cold.

Two minutes later, Painter reappeared, stepping through a puddle and following after the nightmare instead of returning home—all the while muttering to himself that the first part of the drama was always a recap anyway.

Chapter 6

ALL RIGHT, LET'S talk about me.

Uncharacteristically, I don't *want* to discuss the topic. This isn't a bright point in my career, and I would rather the attention be on other less statuesque people for the duration of the narrative. That said, I know it's going to distract some of you unless I explain at least a tad.

What had happened to me?

I didn't know. It's complicated. I arrived on the planet, and immediately froze in place. Unable to move.

Was I aware?

Yes, at first. As the months passed, my senses began to dull. I fell into a kind of trance. Unaware, almost asleep. By the time the events of this story took place, Design and I had been in Kilahito for a bit over three years, Roshar time.

So, how do I know this story?

It started as voices. Dialogue. Lines spoken by Painter, who was near me. Others from Yumi—whose comments were softer, warped, more distant. From there my perception sparked, and I became aware of images, visuals, like they were…well, painted for me. In magenta and teal. Directly into my brain. Sometimes I saw what happened as faint representations, just two lines vaguely in the shapes of people. Other times I saw paintings or full-motion images. I seemed to have some control over which it became, depending on my level of attention.

To this day, I can't completely explain why this happened. Something to do with the Connection between us, though the intricacies of how these things interact sometimes baffle even the most astute arcanists. Regardless, I could tell that whatever was happening with Painter and Yumi was tied to

what had happened to me—that their story was my story, only without the whole "frozen in place, painted copper, unable to interact with one's surroundings" part.

So kindly keep your attention on them. Because I most certainly wasn't going anywhere or doing anything interesting, not anytime soon.

Yumi awoke on the floor of her wagon, a blanket over her. She had been bathed, dressed in her formal sleeping gown, and placed here. Surrounded by flower petals in a circle, along with a ring of seeds for luck. Starlight cut around her in a square, reaching in through the window to gawk.

Sore, still exhausted despite her hours of sleep, Yumi curled up beneath her blanket. They had to be at a halt in their travels. The chill air of night had driven back the worst of the ground's heat, and her wagon had been lowered so that its stone floor could soak up the remaining warmth. She usually loved this. There was a unique comfort to being able to drape a blanket over her and bake in the floor's radiance. It was almost like the planet itself was feeding her strength.

Yumi huddled there for some time, trying to recover. She knew she should feel pride at her accomplishment, and virtually any other person would have.

But she just felt…tired. And guilty over her lack of proper emotions.

And more tired, because guilt of that sort is an immense burden. Heavier than the rocks she'd moved earlier.

Then she felt ashamed. Because guilt has a great number of friends and keeps their addresses handy for quick summons.

Heat seeped up around Yumi, but seemed not to *enter* her. It cooked her, but she remained raw in the middle. She stayed there until the door opened. You might have heard clogged footsteps approaching first, but Yumi didn't notice.

The figure in the doorway—in the deep of night, that figure was little more than a blot of ink on black paper—waited. Until Yumi looked up at last, realizing she'd been crying. The tears hit the floor and didn't immediately evaporate.

"How did I do today, Liyun?" Yumi finally asked, rising to her knees.

"You did your duty," Liyun replied, her voice soft yet rasping. Like ripping paper.

"I…have never heard of a yoki-hijo summoning thirty-seven spirits in one day," Yumi said, hopeful. It wasn't her warden's job to compliment her. But…it would feel good…to hear the words nonetheless.

"Yes," Liyun said. "It will make people question. Were you always capable of this? Were you holding back in other cities, refusing to bless them as you did this one?"

"I…"

"I'm certain it is wisdom in you, Chosen," Liyun said, "to do as you did. I am certain it is not you working too hard, so that the next town in line gets a much smaller blessing and therefore thinks *themselves* less worthy also."

Yumi felt sick at the very thought. Her arms dangled at her sides, because moving them was painful. "I will work hard tomorrow."

"I am sure you will." Liyun paused. "I would hate to think that I trained a yoki-hijo who did not know how to properly pace herself. I would also hate to think that I was such a *poor* teacher that my student thought it wise to pretend to be of lower potential, in order to have an easier time."

Yumi shrank down farther, wincing at the throbs of pain from muscles in her arms and back. Even in great success, it appeared she did not do enough.

"Neither is true, fortunately," she whispered.

"I will tell Gongsha Town," Liyun said, "that they can look forward to a visit from a strong yoki-

hijo tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"May I offer a reminder, Chosen?"

Yumi glanced up, and from where she knelt, the perspective made Liyun seem ten feet tall. A silhouette against the night; a cutout with blank space in the middle.

"Yes," Yumi said. "Please."

"You must remember," Liyun said, "that you are a resource to the land. Like the water of the steamwell. Like the plants, the sunlight, and the spirits. If you do not take care of yourself, you will squander the great position and opportunity you have been given."

"Thank you," Yumi whispered.

"Sleep now, if it pleases you. *Chosen*."

It takes real talent to use an honorific as an insult. I'll give Liyun that much; it's professional courtesy, from one hideous bastard to another.

Liyun turned to leave, then hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at Yumi. "I feel like…" she said, with an odd haunted cast to her voice, "this will happen again. Unless I do something. I am failing as your warden. Perhaps…I will seek advice. There must be something I can do."

She shut the door with a click, and Yumi lowered her eyes. She didn't go back to sleep. She felt too much. Not just pain, not just shame. Other, rebellious things. Numbness. Frustration. Even…anger.

She hauled herself to her feet and walked across the warm stone floor of the wagon to the window. Since her wagon hadn't left yet, the next town must be close; otherwise they'd be on their way.

From here she could see a starlit collection of hundreds of individual plants that had lowered from the sky as the thermals cooled. They spun and drifted lazily near the stone, their gas pockets—one under each of four broad leaves per plant—slowly reinflating, the stalks supporting clusters of seeds growing on top. Scadrians would have called it rice, a type of grain that is smaller and thinner than the ones you eat on Roshar. It wasn't exactly rice. The local word was "mingo." But it boiled up nearly the same except for the deep blue-purple color, so I'll use the more familiar word.

As Yumi watched, some dozen rice plants caught a rogue night thermal and jetted into the air, then drifted lazily back down. Small creatures scurried underneath looking for something to nibble on while avoiding serpents. Both prey and hunter slept in trees during the heat. If they were fortunate—or unfortunate, depending on the perspective—they picked different trees.

A gust across the field made the plants shiver and sway to one side, but night farmers moved along, waving large fans to keep the crops contained. Somewhere distant in the town, a giant crow cawed. (They aren't as big as everyone says; I've never seen one the size of a full-grown man. More like the size of a seven- or eight-year-old.) A village corvider soon hushed the animal with soothing words.

Yumi wished she had someone to comfort her. Instead she rested aching arms on the windowsill and stared out at the placid crops as they turned lazily, occasionally jetting into the air. A tree leashed to the side of the wagon quivered in the breeze, its branches casting lines of shadow across Yumi's face.

She could maybe just…crawl out of the window and start walking. No night farmer would stop a yoki-hijo. She should have felt ashamed at the thought, but she was full up with shame at the moment. A cup filled to the top can't hold anything more. It spills out over the rim, then boils onto the floor.

She wouldn't leave, but that night she wished she could. Wished she could escape the prison of her ceremonial nightgown. She wasn't allowed to *sleep* as a normal person. She had to be reminded even by her undergarments of what she was. Chosen at birth. Blessed at birth. Imprisoned at birth.

I… a voice said in her mind. *I understand…*

Yumi started, spinning around. Then she felt it. A…a spirit. Her soul vibrated with its presence, a powerful one.

Bound… it said. *You are bound…*

Spirits understood her thoughts. That was part of her blessing. But they very, *very* rarely responded to anything a yoki-hijo thought. She'd heard of it happening only in stories.

I am blessed, she thought toward it, bowing her head, suddenly feeling *extremely* foolish. How had she let her fatigue drive her to such insane contemplations? She would anger the spirits. Suddenly she had a terrible premonition: The spirits refusing to be drawn to her performances. Villages going without light, without food, because of her. How could she reject—?

No… the spirit thought. *You are trapped. And we…we are trapped…like you…*

Yumi frowned, turning back to the window. Something was different about this voice. This spirit. It seemed…so very tired. And it was distant? Barely able to reach her? She looked up to the sparkling sky—and the bright daystar, stronger than them all. Was…the spirit…talking to her from there?

You worked so hard today, the spirit said. *Can we give you something? A gift?*

Yumi's breath caught.

She'd read that story.

Most cultures have something similar. Some are terrible, but this wasn't one of those places. Here the boons of spirits were always associated with wondrous adventure.

She shouldn't want adventure though. She hesitated. Teetered, like a stone unbalanced. Then, in what was the most difficult moment of her life, she lowered her eyes.

You have already blessed me, she said. *With the greatest gift a mortal can have. I accept my burden. It is for the best of my people. Forgive my idle thoughts earlier.*

As you wish… the distant spirit said. *Then…could you give…us a boon?*

Yumi looked up. That…never happened in the stories.

How? she asked.

We are bound. Trapped.

She glanced toward the corner of the room, where a spirit light—the spheres touching to turn the light off for sleep—lay on a counter. It was identical to those she'd made earlier today. One light sphere, one dark. Trapped?

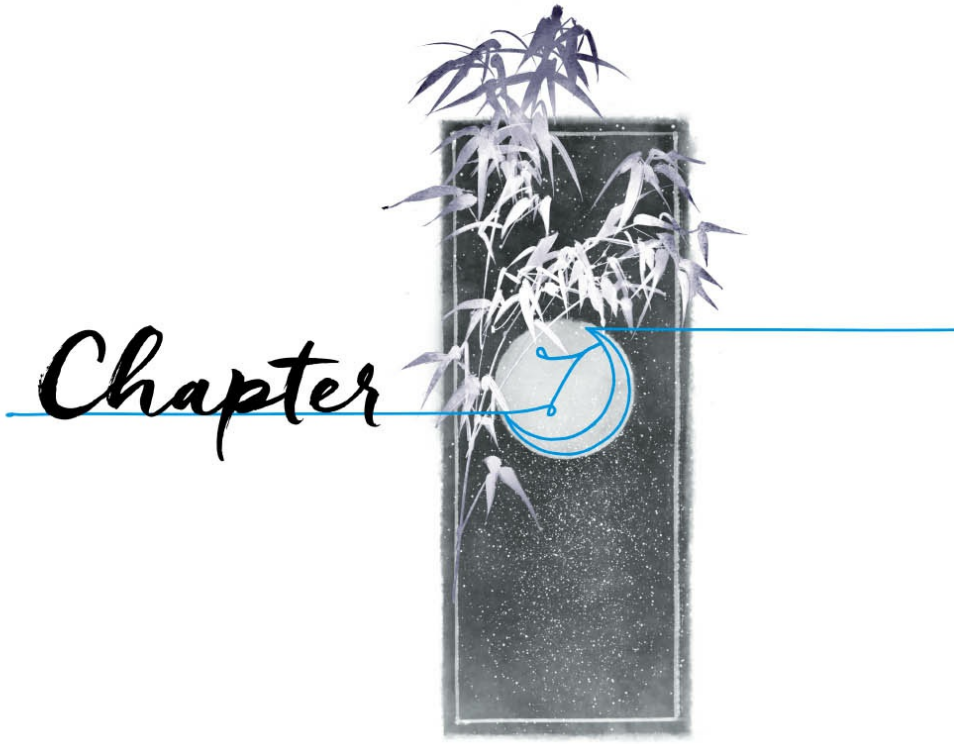
No, the spirit thought. *That is not our prison… We…have a more terrible…existence. Can you free us? Will you…try? There is one who can help you.*

Spirits in trouble? She didn't know what she could do, but it was her duty to see them cared for. Her life was to serve. She was the yoki-hijo. The girl of commanding primal spirits.

Yes, she said, bowing her head again. *Tell me what you need, and I will do whatever I can.*

Please, it said. *Free. Us.*

All went black.



PAINTER WOUND THROUGH the next set of streets, tracking the nightmare as the rain tapped him on the head. The trail was difficult to follow; the dark wisps seemed to vanish in the haze. He backtracked twice as the streets grew narrower, winding through the huddled tenements of the city's outer rings.

The hion lines overhead here were as thin as twine, barely giving him enough light to see by. It got so bad that he eventually decided he'd lost the trail and turned to go home, passing a slit of a window he'd neglected to glance through earlier.

He checked it this time and found the nightmare inside, crouched at the head of a bed.

The room was lit by a faint line of teal hion tracing the ceiling, making shadows of the room's meager furniture and frameless mattress, which held three figures: parents the nightmare had ignored, and a child who made for more…tender prey.

The little boy was perhaps four. He huddled on his side, eyes squeezed shut, holding to a worn pillow that had eyes sewn on it—a poorer family's approximation of a stuffed toy. Treasured regardless.

The nightmare was tall enough that it had to bend over, or its head would have hit the ceiling. A sinuous, boneless neck. A body with lupine features, legs that bent the wrong way, a face with a snout. With a sense of dread, Painter realized why this one had been so difficult to track. Virtually no smoke rose from its body. Most telling, it had *eyes*. Bone white as if drawn in chalk, but as deep as sockets in a skull.

This nightmare barely dripped darkness from its face. It was almost fully *stable*. No longer formless. No longer aimless.

No longer harmless.

This thing must have been incredibly crafty to have escaped notice during so many trips to the city. It took around ten feedings for a nightmare to coalesce to this level. Only a few more, and it would be fully solid. Painter stepped backward, trembling. It already had substance. Things like this could… could *slaughter* hundreds. The entire city of Futinoro had been destroyed by stable nightmares only thirty years earlier.

This was above his pay grade. Quite literally. There was an entire specialized division of painters tasked with stopping stable nightmares. They traveled the land, going to towns where one was spotted.

The sound of a small sniffle broke through Painter's panic. He ripped his eyes from the nightmare to look at the bed, where the child—trembling—had squeezed his eyes closed even tighter.

The child was awake.

At this stage, the nightmare could feed on conscious terror as easily as it did the formless fear of a dream. It ran clawed fingers across the child's cheek, trailing streaks of blood from split skin. The gesture was almost tender. And why shouldn't it be? The child had given the thing shape and substance, ripped directly out of his deepest fears.

Now, the story thus far might have given you an unflattering picture of Painter. And yes, much of that picture is justified. Many of his problems in life were his own fault—and rather than trying to fix them, he alternated between comfortable self-delusion and pointless self-pity.

But you should also know that right then—before the nightmare saw him—he could have easily slipped away into the night. He could have reported this to the foreman, who would have sent for the Dreamwatch. Most painters would have done just that.

Instead, our painter reached for his supplies.

Too much noise. Too much noise! he thought as he slapped his bag onto the pavement and scrambled for a canvas. He couldn't wake the parents. If anyone started screaming, the stable nightmare *would* attack and people *would* die.

Calm. Calm. Don't feed it.

His training barely held as, trembling, he spilled out canvas, brush, and paints. He glanced up.

And found the thing at the window, long neck stretching out toward him, knife-fingers scraping the wall inside the room. Two white eyeholes seemed to suck him into them, pull him through to some other eternity. Before this day, he'd never seen a nightmare with anything resembling a face, but this one smiled with bone-white lupine teeth.

Painter's fingers slipped on the ink jar, and it struck the ground before him with a clink, spilling. He struggled to keep his calm as he fumbled for the jar, then frantically decided to simply dip his brush into the ink puddle.

The nightmare stretched forward…but then caught. It wasn't used to having so much substance, and had trouble pulling itself through the wall. Its claws proved particularly difficult. The delay, though brief, probably saved Painter's life, as he managed to get his umbrella out and open to shelter his canvas so he could begin.

He started with bamboo, naturally. A…a blob at the bottom, then…then the straight line upward with a swipe. Just the briefest pause then to make the next knob… Like clockwork. He'd done this a hundred times.

He looked toward the nightmare, which slowly slid one hand out through the wall—leaving gouges in the stone. Its smile broadened. Painter's mind, in his current state, was most certainly not beneath its notice. And bamboo was *not* going to be enough this time.

Painter tossed aside his canvas and pulled the last one from his bag. Nails ground stone as the thing pulled its other hand through the wall. Rainwater connected with its head, running down the sides of its grinning face: crystalline tears to accompany the midnight ones.

Painter began painting.

There's a certain insanity that defines artists. The willful ability to ignore what *exists*. Millennia of evolution have produced in us not merely the ability to recognize and register light, but to define colors, shapes, objects. We don't often acknowledge how amazing it is that we can tell what something is simply by letting some photons bounce off us.

An artist can't see this way. An artist has to be able to look at a rock and say, "That's not stone. That's a head. At least it will be, once I pound on it with this hammer for a while."

Painter couldn't see just a nightmare. He had to see what it could be, what it *might* have been, if it hadn't been produced by terror. In that moment he saw the child's mother. Though he'd barely glimpsed her face in the bedroom next to her son, he recreated her.

Turn something terrible into something normal. Something loved. He'd been warned that painting the nightmares as people was dangerous, because a person could still hurt you. But tonight it felt right. Even with a few brief strokes, he evoked the shape of her face. Stark eyebrows. Thin lips, faint brushstrokes of ink. The curve of cheeks. For the briefest moment, something returned to him. Something he'd lost in the monotony of a hundred paintings of bamboo. Something beautiful. Or if you were a nearly stabilized nightmare, something terrible.

It fled. An event so incongruous that Painter slipped on his next brush stroke. He looked up and barely caught sight of the thing running away through the alley. It could have attacked, but it wasn't *quite* stable yet. So it chose to flee rather than risk letting him bind it into a passive, harmless shape. In seconds, it was gone.

He breathed out and let the paintbrush drop from his fingers. He was relieved, on one hand. Worried on the other. If it knew to escape…it was dangerous. Extremely dangerous. He had basically no idea how to deal with something like that—and doubted his skill would have been enough to defeat it. Only the most talented painters could bring down a stable nightmare, and he'd learned—painfully—that wasn't him.

Fortunately, he'd done enough to frighten it away. Now he could go and tell his superiors about the encounter, and they'd send for the Dreamwatch. They could hunt it before it finished its last few feedings, and the city would be safe.

He left the canvas on the ground beside the umbrella and stepped up to the wall, wrapping his arms around himself to try to force some warmth into his core. Inside the room, the child had opened his eyes and was staring out the window at him. Painter smiled and nodded.

The kid immediately started screaming. That was a more violent reaction than Painter had been expecting, but it had the desired result: a pair of terrified parents comforting the boy, followed by a hesitant father in shorts opening the tiny window.

He regarded the supplies on the ground—paintings slowly losing their ink to the rain—and the wet young man standing in the alleyway.

"…Painter?" he asked. "Was it…"

"A nightmare," Painter said, feeling numb. "Feeding off your son's dreams."

The man backed away from the window, eyes wide. He searched the room, as if to find something hiding in the corners.

"I frightened it away," Painter said. "But…this was a strong one. Do you have family in another city?"

"My parents," the man said. "In Fuhima."

"Go there," Painter said, speaking words he'd been taught to say in such a situation. "Nightmares can't track a person that far—your son will be safe until we can deal with the horror. There is a fund available to help you during this time. Once I register what happened, you'll be able to access it."

The man looked at the child huddled in his mother's arms, weeping. Then at Painter—who knew what would come next. Demands, asking why he'd let the thing escape. Why he hadn't been strong enough, good enough, practiced enough to capture the thing.

Instead the man dropped to his knees, bowing his head. "Thank you," he whispered. He looked back up at Painter, tears in his eyes. "*Thank you.*"

Huh. Painter blinked, stammered a second. Then found his words. "Think nothing of it, citizen," he said. "Just a man doing his job." Then, with as much decorum as he could manage in the rain—and with hands still trembling from the stress—he gathered up his things.

By the time he finished, the family was already packing their meager possessions. You'd forgive Painter for walking a little swiftly, often checking over his shoulder, as he wound through the narrows. He had the feeling of one who had nearly been crushed by a falling piece of stone. A part of him couldn't believe he had escaped with his life.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped out onto a larger road and saw other people—the regular foot traffic of the morning shift. The star was low in the sky, barely visible over the horizon at the end of the street.

He looked toward the foreman's offices, but suddenly found himself unnaturally tired. His feet like clay, mushy, his head a boulder. He teetered. He needed…sleep.

The nightmare would not return to the city tonight. It would run to the shroud, regenerate, then slink in the following…night. He could tell the foreman…when he woke…

Sluggish, his mind a haze, he turned toward home, which was fortunately nearby. He barely registered arriving, climbing the stairs, and walking to his apartment. It took him four tries to get the key in, but once he stumbled into his room and threw on his pajamas, he paused.

Dared he sleep? The family…needed his report…for the funds…

What was happening to him? Why did he suddenly feel like he'd been drained of strength? Abruptly gasping for breath, he flung open his window for fresh air, leaning out. Then he heard something odd. A rushing sound? Like…water?

He looked up toward the star.

Something came from the sky and struck him. Hard.

All went black.

PAINTER BLINKED. He was hot. Uncomfortably hot, and something was shining in his face. A garish light, like from the front of a hion-line bus.

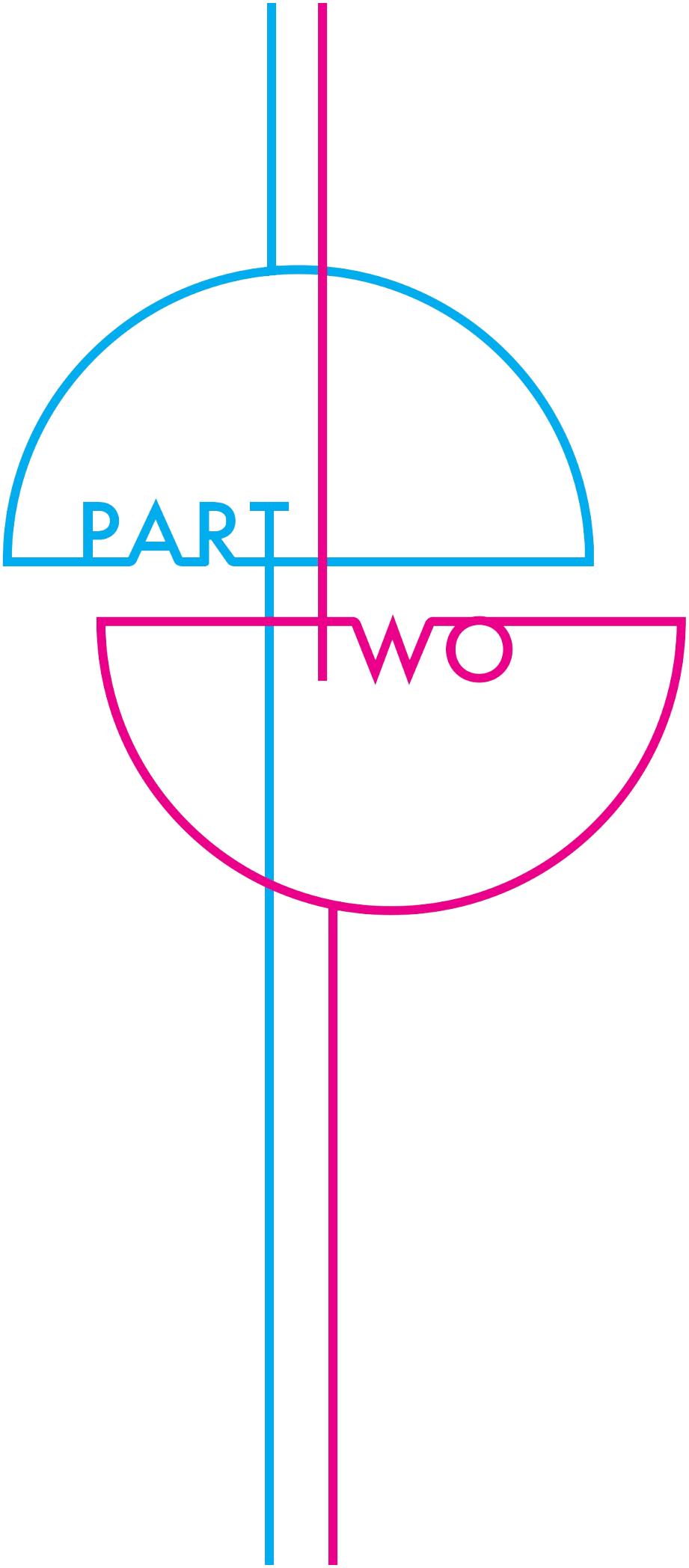
He blinked his eyes open and was immediately blinded by that terrible overpowering light.

What was (lowly) going on? He'd hit his head perhaps? He forced his eyes open against the light and pushed himself with effort to a sitting position. He was wearing…bright cloth? Yes, some sort of bulky formal nightdress made of bright red-and-blue cloth.

Beside him lay a young woman. You'd recognize her as Yumi.

She opened her eyes.

Then screamed.


PART
TWO

PAINTER BOLTED TO his feet. He was in a small room with a stone floor, wooden walls, and no furniture.

That *impossibly* bright light—flooding in through the room's single window—washed everything out, making it difficult to see. He raised his hand against the bizarre red-orange glare. That was a color that light should never be. To him, seeing it was like seeing someone spill the wrong color of blood.

Plus, that girl. How had he ended up lying next to her? She scrambled to her knees and grabbed at her blanket.

Her hands went straight through it as if she weren't there.

Right. Okay. This was…a dream, maybe? Painter knew dreams. His classes—which he'd mostly paid attention to while secretly drawing in his notebook—had covered their nature in detail. This didn't feel at *all* like a dream, but he knew you couldn't trust yourself while in one.

He needed to find some writing. According to his classes, that was one possible way to prove he was dreaming—you usually couldn't read in a dream.

"Attendants!" the girl shouted. "Attendants!" She continued scrabbling at the blanket, but it kept passing through her fingers. As if…

Oh no. Was she a nightmare?

Paper. He needed paper. Still shading his eyes against the garish light from the window, he did another scan of the room—but this place was completely empty. Who lived in a room with no dressers, no futon, not even a table?

Wait. Book over there, on a shelf. He snatched it and flipped through the pages. Looked like a bunch of prayers? He could read them without trouble.

The girl fell silent as her cries for help fortunately brought no response. If she *was* a nightmare, she…well, she defied his knowledge. One that was fully stable like she was should have been physical. She also shouldn't have had color, or the shape of a girl, but should have taken the form of something twisted and imaginary.

Unless she was *beyond* stable. There were stories of the last days of some of the cities that had been attacked, of solid nightmares that had begun to change color, more like flesh tones… But no, this girl wasn't crazed, lashing out in a maddened frenzy, trying to kill. She couldn't be a nightmare.

He glanced back at the book. He could read it. That wasn't sure proof, and yet…well, he knew dreams. He knew nightmares. He wasn't dreaming. Time was linear. Causality was in effect. He could read, feel, and—most importantly—consider whether this was a dream without feeling a disconnect.

Somehow, this was real.

The girl, who was wearing a nightdress identical to what he had on, frantically clawed for her blankets. Painter didn't know how to respond. He'd never woken next to an incorporeal girl before. While that's far more pleasant than some of the things *I've* woken up in bed with, it can still be rather disorienting.

"You wear my clothing…" the girl whispered. "You…you're not an intruder, are you? You're the spirit I talked to. You've taken shape?"

Painter wasn't certain what she was talking about, but—on account of it being better than being screamed at—he decided to play things cool. "Cool" in this case meant pretending that he knew what was going on. He closed the book and put it back on the shelf. Then he folded his arms and gave her his best confident "I am a dark and mysterious warrior" look.

She bowed her head. "You *are* the powerful spirit. Please forgive me for my attitude earlier. I was surprised, confused. I did not mean offense."

Wait.

That had *worked*?

Wow. What next?

Well, if someone thought he was cool, then he shouldn't undermine or contradict that. It felt like a good rule to live by. Even if this was his first real chance to experiment with it.

"Where am I?" he said.

"You are in my wagon," the girl said. "The wagon of a yoki-hijo. I am Yumi, and this is my chamber."

"And…where is your furniture?"

"I need no furniture," she said, "as my sole purpose is to serve and to contemplate your greatness."

That…felt like it went too far. He shuffled uncomfortably, then considered that maybe he could see where he was by checking out that window. He'd been deliberately avoiding that too-powerful red-orange light. This entire experience was impossible, but that light…it was *incomprehensible*. How could anything so bright exist?

With trepidation, Painter approached the window, though part of him was certain the light would burn him. It seemed so much more…well, just *more* than the twin hion lines. It was like the very essence of flame. He put his toe into it, cringing—but nothing happened.

He stepped fully into it and felt like he'd slipped into a warm bath. How strange. Blinking against the brightness, he raised his hand to shade his eyes and looked out. I wouldn't call that a *mistake*, not

really. But like a ten-year-old asking for the explanation of where babies came from, he did *not* know what he was getting himself into.

Painter gazed up into a sky that was not dark. Instead it was a washed-out blue extending into infinity, dominated by an enormous ball of light. Like a huge light bulb in the sky except not soft and white, but angry and red-orange.

As if that weren't enough, *plants* dotted the sky. Big bunches of them, tended by great black crows that fanned them toward each other if they strayed. Flying objects buzzed around, organizing the crows and chasing away undomesticated birds.

The land went on forever, brown stone occasionally sprinkled with hovering flowers. It was a lot to take in. More than he could manage. He didn't even notice, for example, that Yumi's wagon was floating in the air.

What he *did* notice overwhelmed his remaining skepticism like a group of thirsty customers shoving open the door to the bar right before opening. This was real. But it wasn't any place he knew about, or any place he'd read about. It wasn't like his home at all. It was like…another planet?

"The star," he said, pointing at a gleam on the horizon.

"The daystar, spirit?" Yumi asked from behind.

"The news report said that *people* live on the star! That it's another world, like ours. I remember… a nightmare coming down from the sky, engulfing me…"

It had taken him to this place, perhaps? Then was that his home, up in the sky, visible from this position?

"Powerful spirit," Yumi said from where she knelt. "I don't understand what you're saying, but please. Could I know what you've done to me? And…how long you intend it to continue? That I might know your will, and properly worship it."

Yeah…acting cool was one thing. Making a young woman think he was some powerful divinity was another. "Look," he said. "I'm, uh, not—"

He was interrupted as a knock came at the door. Yumi raised her head in a panic, then glanced at Painter. "Please, spirit," she said, "restore me. *Please.*"

The door opened and two women entered. One was short and squat, in her twenties, the other in her thirties and more willowy. They were dressed in similarly strange, too-wide dresses, their hair up in buns. Painter felt a bit of Yumi's same panic. She might assume he was some kind of important spirit, but surely these older people would respond differently. What was the punishment in this land for being caught invading a young woman's bedchamber?

The only thing he could think to do was fold his arms again in a confident posture. He thought it was impressive. It might have been—if you were a four-year-old wanting tips on how to pout.

The two women, however, walked straight through Yumi as if they couldn't see her. They carried a small table, for sitting on the floor while eating, and a bowl of rice. They approached Painter and knelt, bowing.

He eyed Yumi, who stood up, her long hair snarled from sleep. She cocked her head, then walked forward and waved her hand in front of the women. "Chaeyung?" Yumi asked. "Hwanji? Can you hear me?"

The two gave no response. They remained kneeling, though one looked up at Painter. "Chosen?" she asked. "Are…are you well?"

Yumi gasped, her eyes widening. "Spirit…you've taken my *shape*?"

Had he?

Wait, no. He wasn't a spirit.

He had *no* (lowly) *idea* what was happening.

(As a reminder, Yumi's and Painter's languages have this curious feature that makes narratives rather hard on a storyteller speaking to a crowd of people without high or low variations in their boring languages. Conveying this can be awkward, but I'm doing my best. You're welcome.)

Anyway, while Painter was confused, he *was* also hungry. And these women appeared to be waiting for him to eat. He decided that the confident thing to do—the way of the solitary warrior—was to get some sustenance so that he could continue being mysterious without his stomach growling. So he settled down and took the bowl of rice from the hands of one of the women.

"Thanks," he said, taking the maipon sticks from another. He started eating. "You have anything to go with this?"

The two women gasped.

"Why, spirit?" Yumi begged. "Why have you taken my form? You…cast me out? I am only a soul, and you have my body? But why can *I* see you in the shape of a young man?" She knelt before him, in line with the others. "Please. I don't understand. *Please.* Tell me your will."

He hesitantly stopped, the mouthful of rice half-chewed. One of the women reached for the bowl and he shied back, then took another bite, judging their reaction. Horror?

"Is it…poisoned or something?" he said. "Not that I mind. I am strong enough to stomach any poison, of course."

The two women fled, abandoning the table and other dining implements. They left the door swinging—spilling in more garish light—and ran off, their feet clopping on the stone ground. Were they…wearing wooden shoes?

Yumi watched him with tears in her eyes. Then remarkably, subtly, her expression shifted. Drooping lips went taut. Teeth clenched. Her muscles tensed.

"That's *it*," she said (lowly). "I'm *done*!"

Chapter 1

IT'S A COMMON mistake to assume that someone is weak because they are accommodating. If you think this, you might be the type who has no idea how much effort—how much *strength*—it takes to put up with your nonsense.

Yumi wasn't weak. She wasn't a pushover. Don't assume fragility where you should see patience. Beyond that, she did have her limits. They had just been reached.

"I've served you all my life!" Yumi said, standing tall. "I've given *everything* to you!"

The spirit blinked. And, well, Yumi hadn't *intended* to make an outburst. I think that is rather part of the definition. The words simply gushed out.

"I made a mistake!" she said. "I somehow worked *too hard* yesterday. Is that why you decided to rise? Why you demanded my help, then took my shape? Is *that* what this is? Punishment? You're here to embarrass me! You *know* how someone like me is to act. You decreed it! So the sole reason you'd grab that bowl and start eating is to humiliate me!"

Yumi finished, sucking in deep gasps, filled with a remarkable species of anger. She'd never let herself act like this before. One might have assumed it to be refreshing, but for her, it was more… inevitable. You dropped a brick and it fell. You dropped a flower and it floated. You pushed a person too far and…well, they exploded. Like a steamwell. The pressure had to go somewhere.

She squeezed her eyes shut, hands making fists, and braced herself. She wasn't certain what happened when you defied the spirits in such a terrible, insolent way. There were all kinds of *implications* of course, but few explicit answers. An ordinary person could have escaped with only some bad luck, but she was a yoki-hijo.

She expected to be ripped to pieces. Perhaps to be compressed to the size of a marble. Maybe

she'd be fortunate and the spirit would merely curse her to spit lizards when she tried to talk. But she couldn't have stopped the outburst. She was exhausted, sore, overwhelmed.

She waited. An uncomfortably long time.

Then finally, the spirit spoke.

"Let's pretend," it said, "that I'm *not* a spirit like you think I am. How bad would that be?"

Yumi cracked one eye. He sat there, a piece of rice sticking to his cheek. As soon as he noticed she'd opened her eye, he puffed up a little, sitting straighter, and made a strange face. As if… nauseated? She couldn't read it.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I wish that I did," he said. "But I'm not a spirit. I'm a person. Granted, a *mysterious* one."

"Mysterious?"

"Incredibly," he said. "Look, I don't know what this place is or why I'm here. But I think…I might be from another planet." He winced when he said it. "Does that sound crazy?"

She cocked her head.

"That star in the sky?" he said, standing up and pointing at the window. "The one you called the daystar? I'm from there. Maybe. It's my best theory."

"You're…human?"

"A hundred percent."

"Born from a mother?"

He nodded.

"You eat? You sleep? You…deposit the spirits' gifts back into the ecosystem to be reused?"

"Excuse me?" he said.

Yumi was barely listening. Was it possible she'd gotten this wrong? Well, of course. She was, as has been established, exhausted, sore, overwhelmed. Not the best state of mind for logical thought.

She reflected on what had happened the night before: The spirit talking to her, saying it was trapped. Asking her to free it. It hadn't sounded angry at her weakness. It had said, *There is one who can help you.*

"They *sent* you," Yumi whispered. "They sent you to help me! The spirits are in danger. There are stories like this—great heroes tasked with quests by the spirits." Her eyes widened. "They needed a boon from me. They needed my body? I couldn't do what they needed, so they've put you in my place… Tell me, are you a great warrior among your kind? The people of the daystar?"

He considered a moment. Longer than she'd have predicted. He was humble, evidently. Finally he nodded. "Yes. I'm among the greatest."

Her state made some sense then. The spirits had no substance until she called them. It stood to reason that in taking her form for this hero, they had given her a form as insubstantial as a spirit herself. She could feel her nightdress, but nothing else. Even the floor beneath her feet seemed to have no substance. She wasn't certain how she walked or moved on it.

"My attendants will return soon, hopefully," Yumi said. "Tell them what has happened." She reached out absently to take his hand in supplication. "They will know how to help. Please, we must…" She trailed off as her hand touched his.

She felt an immediate shiver, like when she stepped into cool water—but heat followed. Warmth *flooded* her, moving up her fingers in a rush, accompanied by an almost electric tingling. It surged through her, overwhelming her, driving away all other thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

When she'd touched the blanket, she'd felt nothing. Not even a tingling as her fingers passed through. The same when her attendants had walked through her.

But this other effect was completely unexpected. She let go and jumped back, sucking in a breath, sweat prickling on her brow. He gaped at his hand, and his posture made it obvious he'd felt it too. A connection between her spirit and her body, perhaps? She found it difficult to speak for a moment, gasping for air—though without a body, that metaphor didn't quite work. But when she looked at him, she felt like she was blushing all the way from her toes to the roots of her hair.

All right, she thought. *Maybe don't touch him. It is…distracting.*

"That was *crazy*," he said. "Touching you was like touching a raw hion line…"

She backed away, embarrassed. "Maybe," she said, "I could go see what's happening in the town? It's possible that in my current state, I might be able to communicate with the spirits."

"Sure. Um, I mean…a valiant suggestion."

She nodded and hesitantly stepped out of the wagon. She had slept barefoot and was worried about not having clogs, but her feet didn't feel the ground's heat. Only a yard past the door, however, she felt a sudden pulling sensation. She was unable to move any farther, as if she was tethered to him. She backed up, then tried running to escape the pull—but when she hit the edge of it she was yanked backward, as if on an elastic rope.

She spun and stumbled into the wagon. He stepped forward as if to catch her, and her chest brushed against his.

That warmth flooded her again, radiating deep into her core. With a yelp, she managed to leap away, then fell to the floor. Having no body, it didn't hurt, but her blush was hotter this time. Celibacy was a fact of a yoki-hijo's life, naturally. And she was very much in control of that aspect of her emotions. Absolutely in control. Yes indeed.

She was rescued from her embarrassment as a severe figure stepped up to the door of her wagon, which was still swinging open. Liyun wore yellow on black today, as was the ritual for the fourth day of the month. As usual, she didn't *appear* angry. One did not speak in *anger* to a yoki-hijo.

Besides, Liyun was expert at expressing emotions without speaking them.

"I hear, Chosen," she said, leaving her clogs and swooping up onto the floor of the wagon, "that you have, in your wisdom, decided to violate ritual today." She walked past Yumi, in a heap on the floor.

"Oh," the hero said. "Right. So, I'm supposed to tell you that I'm not who you think I am. I'm a hero, er, that the spirits brought? Look, my home is on that star out there, a place where the light is normal? Teal and magenta? Not…whatever is out there."

Yumi crawled on her knees to Liyun, then stumbled to her feet and nodded eagerly. Surely the warden would know how to approach this. Surely she could help the two of them understand what the spirits wanted.

"You realize," Liyun said softly, "that a Chosen must continue to serve, even through personal difficulties."

"Sure?" the hero said. "I guess?"

"If a Chosen," Liyun continued, "were to try to *escape* her duties through fabricated nonsense… why, it would only make life harder for her. And for everyone. The guilt of such lies would eventually tear her apart within." Liyun bowed her head, as if in subservience. "Chosen. I apologize for my boldness in explaining to you that which you already know quite well."

Yumi sank back to her knees, a sick lump in her throat. That was…that was exactly what she should have expected from Liyun. If she'd been less out of sorts, she would have realized that sooner.

"I see," the hero said. He thought a moment, then he…posed? With arms folded? Did he think that looked dramatic when he was wearing a nightgown? "I don't think you are taking me seriously

enough. I—"

"Please," Yumi said, interrupting. "Please, hero. My previous plan was flawed. Just…just go along with what she is saying."

He frowned, glancing at Yumi.

"Liyun," Yumi said, "will never believe that I, of all yoki-hijo, was blessed in this way by the spirits. Just…for now, could you do as I say?"

"Who is she?" he asked.

"My head servant."

He seemed skeptical about that. Liyun, who had only heard his part of that conversation, opened her mouth to offer another passive-aggressive piece of "advice." Yumi spoke first.

"Tell her this: 'I am sorry, Warden-nimi. I felt remnants of a dream, and was speaking according to them. By overtaxing myself yesterday, I've left myself weakened, as your wise counsel indicated. Forgive my indiscretions.'"

He reluctantly repeated the words, cutting Liyun off.

The warden fell silent, studying him.

"Kneel," Yumi whispered. "Please? And bow your head? I know it's not very heroic, but…"

He obeyed, doing as she asked.

"Then shall I order the rituals to continue?" Liyun said. "Without interruption? It is, of course, your prerogative, Chosen."

The hero glanced at Yumi, as if to ask whether she actually had a choice. Which she didn't.

"I will continue the rituals," she said, and the hero repeated it. "Please send the attendants back. And apologize to Hwanji that I addressed her directly."

Liyun accepted this, and turned and slipped out, her clogged feet clomping on the stone as she went to search for Hwanji and Chaeyung. Yumi pulled her hands to her breast and bowed her head, trying to still her racing heart. She always felt so *tense* when Liyun was serving her. More so now. The woman was already convinced that Yumi was trying to dodge her responsibilities…and with good reason. Yumi was, she knew, a poor representative of the Chosen.

But the spirits had come to her for help. They had sent a hero. That meant something, didn't it?

"I don't get it," the hero said. "She's your servant?"

"Everyone serves me," Yumi said softly, "so that I may serve the world. It is my honor and duty to call the spirits, and bind them to the service of the people of Torio. As such, the people are…deeply invested in freeing me from worldly concerns, so I may focus solely on my important obligations."

"It's not just the sky that's weird here, then?" he said. "It's the (lowly) people too?"

"I must say," Yumi told him, bowing further, "that you are taking this well, hero. Many would insist this is nothing but a dream. Your adventures in your land must have been great and interesting for this experience to be mundane to you."

"I wouldn't call it mundane," he replied. "I just…have experience with dreams. My name is Painter, by the way."

"Painter," she said, mouthing the word. "It means 'one who paints' in our language. That is interesting."

"I…I think I said it that way, in your language. Which I appear to be able to speak and read. Anyway, it's more a title than a name." He thought a moment. "So…I'm going to have to pretend to be you? At least until we get this all sorted out?"

"Yes," she said. "If we can make it through the early part of the day, we should be able to approach the spirits and find out from them what we are to do. Perhaps…perhaps then we will know how to

explain this to Liyun?"

That didn't seem likely to Yumi, but the hero—Painter—didn't know enough to object. Instead he scratched his head. She found it odd, naturally, that the spirits had sent a youth of her own age as the hero. Perhaps their ages had to match for the transfer to occur. And likely a hero this young was *more* incredible, to have accomplished so much in only two decades of life.

"Those other women were offended," he said, "when I took the food. Was it for them to eat, then?"

"They must feed you," Yumi said.

"What? Like a baby?"

"You must be free," she explained, "of all worldly concerns. Others will do everything for you that you need."

"That…sounds extremely patronizing," he said. "Maybe even humiliating."

She blushed. Well, as she considered it, perhaps to an outsider it would give that impression. Never to her, of course.

Despite his reservations, Painter didn't object when the attendants returned and set out their things. They'd prepared a new bowl of rice, and—with Yumi's coaching—he did the appropriate ritual moves, letting them feed him bite by bite. Liyun haunted the doorway, though she normally wouldn't come to Yumi until after morning prayers.

As the meal progressed, Yumi managed to calm herself. Painter took direction well. She would have expected a hero to be more arrogant, but he did as she asked. By the end of the meal, Yumi was feeling far more composed and confident. They could manage this. They could approach the spirits, and receive direction. All they needed to do now was…

Was…

Oh.

Oh no.

The attendants rose and fetched their fans. Liyun gestured for Painter to stand and leave.

"Okay," he whispered to Yumi as she stood up with him. "I think I'm getting the hang of this. What's next?"

"Next," she said, "we need to take our ritual bath."

Chapter 10

"RITUAL BATH?" PAINTER said, thoughtful. That sounded nice. This place was much hotter than back home. A little refreshment would be welcome. "I suppose I could use a bath. It won't be too hot, will it?"

"The ritual bath is in the town's cool spring," Yumi explained. "Each day I work in a new town, so I do not know the layout—but the spring should be upon high ground. While you are here, it will be reserved exclusively for you, hero."

That *did* sound nice, particularly following what he'd been through. How could a simple meal be so taxing?

Unfortunately, his conscience was working on him. Painter had gotten himself into some trouble with issues like this—expectations from others, warranted or not—in the past. While thinking of those days brought pain, he'd sworn he would never get into that kind of trouble again.

Nonetheless, here he was. As the two attendants were out of the room, he found himself standing and staring at the strange ghostly girl with long hair. And words came out.

"You asked if I'm a great warrior," he said. "Are you needing me to fight something, then?"

"I don't *think* it will require that," she said. "I don't know, honestly. The spirits will need to be formed, and then asked. They said they're trapped somehow; perhaps you can rescue them?"

"By forming them?" he said, relaxing a little. "Does this require painting?"

"Painting?" she said, cocking her head. "We call them. Through art."

Through art.

Right. Okay. That he could do. Maybe even something other than bamboo. Was it true—had he been summoned to an entirely different world simply to…to paint? He should probably make sure, he

thought. He looked to the girl to explain more, but…

She was just so *hopeful*. Emotions flowed inside him like blood from wounds, warm and sharp. How long had it been since he'd felt *needed*, *wanted*? He didn't mean to lie. He wasn't *really* lying, was he? Her spirits had chosen him, brought him here, perhaps to paint them.

In that moment, he wanted *so badly* to be the hero someone needed. To have a chance to make up for the mistakes of his past. To become something. It wasn't arrogance, as some of you might assume. It was more desperation.

Deep down, Painter saw himself as a ruined canvas—the painting spoiled by spilled ink, then tossed into the trash. This was his chance to spread himself out and start a new drawing on the back. He seized that opportunity like a ravenous man at his first bowl of rice in days.

"Lead on," he said, dropping his mysterious loner affectations and speaking with a heartfelt passion. "I'll do it. Whatever it is you need, I promise, I'll *do* it."

Yumi gestured to the doors. The attendants and that awful woman—Liyun, Yumi had called her—had gone that way. He leaned out of the doorway and looked around, hoping he'd be able to walk this part rather than being carried or something. Curiously the building—indeed a wagon as Yumi had said—appeared to be floating. That was…odd. But not much more than—

He stepped on the ground.

Barefoot.

Painter yelped and leaped back onto the wooden steps, shaking the wagon-room. The ground was *hot*. Extremely hot; like as hot as a *stove*.

For the first time, he looked specifically at the clogs everyone was wearing. Liyun and the attendants, in turn, stared at him with horrified expressions. It was the same sort of expression you might have given a person who sat down to dinner, then started eating the plate.

"What is wrong, hero?" Yumi asked. "I recognize you are mighty and strong, but there is no reason you need to walk without shoes." She frowned, glancing down at his bare feet.

"This place is…" He trailed off, not wanting to spoil the illusion for Liyun and the attendants. Finally, he took a deep breath and slipped on the pair of clogs by the door. It seemed he hadn't burned himself too badly, as the pain was fading, but he was still timid as he stepped onto the ground.

The procession started off. Painter felt proud of how well he walked in the thick clogs; they looked more awkward than they actually were. He merely had to be deliberate with each step. He looked to Yumi, but she lowered her gaze and seemed reticent. Even more than earlier. What had he done this time?

There were plenty of other oddities to occupy his attention. For example, the attendants held out big fans to hide him from the eyes of the gathering townspeople. That left gaps through which he could be seen though, and apparently the entire town had lined up to catch a glimpse of him.

Why the pageantry? Couldn't they have pulled him in the wagon to this new location? This halfway measure with the fans felt deliberate—like pretending not to care if anyone noticed your new haircut, but running your hands through it every time anyone glanced your way.

There were also those floating plants—but at least he'd seen those from the wagon. So he didn't gawk. Much. But then there was a very odd contraption at the center of the town—a big shiny metal thing made of wide sets of plates, as big across as a building. What was *that* all about?

At least the people looked human. He would have expected aliens from another planet to have…he didn't know. Some extra appendages? Seven eyes? Instead they were just people. Mostly eager-eyed, in bright clothing of a completely different fashion and design than he was used to. It reminded him of formal dresses and wraps worn at weddings among his people—at least the colors were similar. But

these outfits were far bulkier, particularly on the women, whose dresses were bell-shaped instead of sleek and tight as was common in Kilahito. The men wore clothing that was loose and baggy—often pastel, with a watercolor softness—tied closed at the ankles. They accented these with the occasional black hat, and many wore neat short beards, which you rarely saw among Painter's people.

The townspeople stayed behind as Painter was led to some nearby hills. Close to the top, his attendants and he entered a secluded alcove where a pool of water filled a natural basin perhaps fifteen feet across. It looked to be only about waist-deep, and no steam rose from it. That was a good sign. Painter was already sweating. How did these people live here with that giant ball of fire in the sky constantly glaring at them?

His attendants drew to a halt outside as he stepped up to the edge of the pool. Yes, this part should be nice. He looked to Yumi, who had followed him past rocks that provided privacy. She was blushing furiously. Why…

Ah. Suddenly it made sense. She couldn't get more than ten feet or so from him, but he had to take a bath.

"It's all right," he whispered to her. "Just go behind those rocks over there and sit down."

"Hero?" she said. "That wouldn't be appropriate."

Then she began to disrobe, undoing the bow on her dress. She was some type of ghost, but it seemed her clothing was part of whatever she was, because she was able to remove the overdress and set it down, leaving her in an underdress akin to a thin nightgown.

"Wait," he said. "*That* wouldn't be appropriate? But *this* is?"

"I may be in spirit form," Yumi explained, "but I am still the yoki-hijo, and must follow the directions of the spirits. I must do my ritual cleansing. If we're going to figure out what it is they have sent you to do, then I must be pure before their eyes."

Painter tried to forcibly stifle his blush. He figured that heroes didn't blush. Unless they…what, had just slain their fourth dragon and had too much to drink?

"Well then," he said, "we could simply bathe in clothing."

"You can't be ritually cleansed that way," she said. "Besides, Chaeyung and Hwanji would think that very strange."

She nodded to the side, where his two attendants were walking up to join him. He'd assumed they were staying behind to give him privacy, but in fact they'd stopped to gather some soaps. And evidently to disrobe.

Because neither was wearing a scrap of clothing.

For a moment, Painter was rooted in place. Naturally it wasn't out of embarrassment, as he was a mighty hero or some such rubbish. It was probably something far more heroic. Like indigestion.

"At least they see you as me," Yumi said, "so you will not embarrass them."

Embarrass *them*.

Right.

That was what he was worried about.

The two set aside their soaps and began to undress him, because of course they did. Now, if you should ever find yourself in a similar position, *this* would be the place to call a stop to it. It doesn't matter if you're in a story, or if the fate of the world is at risk, or if it's merely the result of a few stupid decisions. You never need to let someone undress you if you're against the idea.

Painter, however, was *determined* to help. To not mess up this chance like he'd messed up his real life. So he tried to play it off as nothing. He did so poorly, mind you, but one might admire his gumption. You *could* have assumed his blush to be due to the heat, and he *almost* managed to look

stoic. Until he glanced at Yumi, who had pulled off her underdress but clutched it awkwardly to her chest. Her long, shimmering black hair falling over her shoulders and around her arms.

"You…must have done this hundreds of times," Yumi said to him, her eyes lowered. "Been…in situations like this. With women. A hero like you would be revered and lauded."

"Uh…" Painter said. The attendants glanced at him. "I'm talking to a spirit," he said to them. "Please, um, ignore me."

They frowned at this, but pulled off his own undergarment.

"It's…something *very* new to me," Yumi said. "Do you suppose maybe you could…avert your gaze?"

Oh. Right. That was an option, wasn't it?

Now, you might be a little upset at Painter for not realizing this earlier, as it was the obvious gentlemanly thing to do. Please do remember, this had all come upon him rather unexpectedly. It's hard to be gentlemanly when the world isn't being particularly gentle with you.

But if you can't be a gentleman, you can at least not be a creep. Painter closed his eyes.

The attendants led him into the water, which he found warm. This was the *cold* spring? They began bathing him with the ritual soaps, and didn't exclaim or run screaming at the discovery of certain unexpected bits, so Painter assumed that the illusion—or whatever it was—worked absolutely, even to those touching him.

He did his best to relax. They didn't see him as him, so there was nothing to be embarrassed about. He figured that Tojin, back home, probably would have been *thrilled* to be in a situation like this. It would give him all kinds of opportunities to flex his muscles for everyone. Or who knew; maybe Tojin bathed with women all the time. He did always have Akane hanging off him.

Yes, Tojin would probably relish the experience. Painter wondered if he shouldn't try to do so as well. Wasn't that what a great hero would do? He could put his back to Yumi and enjoy looking at the other two.

But that idea disgusted him. The attendants didn't know who he was. It wasn't right.

You're a coward, a part of him thought. *This might even be a dream. Enjoy it.*

But…well, he just couldn't. Yumi was one thing. She'd chosen to come bathe here, knowing what he was. The attendants were another thing entirely. So he kept his eyes closed as he was washed. Unfortunately, he lost his footing while standing up, and started to slip. Through no fault of his own, his eyes popped open.

He found Yumi standing in the water nearby, looking at his waist—well, below it—her head cocked. As soon as she saw his eyes open, she squeaked and squeezed hers closed.

"Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry!" she said. "I didn't mean to do that. I—"

"It's fine." He closed his eyes again. "It's a…difficult situation." He meant that. After all, he'd basically done the same thing.

As the attendants finished his current rinse and he leaned back into the water, his hand drifted to the side and accidentally touched Yumi's. Again the powerful sense of warmth thrummed through him. Overwhelming, even *exhausting*.

But with it, this time, came emotions. Her emotions. He could feel her fear, her embarrassment, her shame. Her deeper terror that something was very, *very* wrong—and that she didn't know how to fix it.

(She, in turn, felt much of the same from him—though when she sensed the shield he put up to protect his natural shyness, she interpreted it as confidence. She felt his own embarrassment, and the shame buried so far beneath his surface emotions it might as well have been magma churning beneath

the crust of the planet.)

Then, as they broke the touch, both felt better. The situation was horribly awkward, but in that moment they realized it was a *shared* experience of horrible awkwardness that they had to get through together. Trauma doesn't decrease with company, but it does grow easier to work through when you know someone else understands.

The attendants dunked him, and he—at Yumi's instruction—did his best to stay underwater for the ritual amount of time. After that, the attendants withdrew from the pool to dry off, then stepped outside to dress and prepare the yoki-hijo's tobok, which would take a few minutes. Alone with Yumi, Painter tipped his head back and relaxed into the warm water, his eyes closed. He let his hand drift out, kind of hoping it would touch Yumi's again.

"I truly *am* sorry," she whispered, somewhere nearby. She hadn't gotten out, then. "I…don't have much experience…with men, you see. It's not part of my training."

"Is it part of anyone's?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Did you…lead a normal life when you were young? Before you became a hero?"

"Depends on what you call normal. I'd say it was…unremarkable in most ways. But not you? You've lived with *this* all your life?"

"This has been my duty since I was chosen by the spirits as a baby." She paused. "You may think it confining, but it's an *enormous* honor. I provide such an important service to the people. Our society could not exist without the yoki-hijo. Thousands would starve."

He wanted to be encouraging, but words eluded him. He'd pretended to be a hero for so long that now that he had to live up to that ideal, even deciding what to say was difficult. Still, as he drifted there, somewhere near her, he found himself increasingly thrilled to be stolen from his other life and brought to this strange place.

This, you might note, is somewhat different from many stories. Painter wasn't reluctant. He wasn't eager to get back to his life. What was there for him at home? Instead he was excited to find a way to actually help Yumi. To change the world.

But wait, he thought. *There was a stable nightmare. I never reported it.* He could only vaguely remember trailing back to his apartment, struck by what now seemed a supernatural exhaustion, his mind a fuzz.

He had to find a way home, or that nightmare could do serious damage. Kill and rampage. It was a sudden, cruel irony that the one time in his life where his otherwise monotonous job was urgent…was the same time he'd found himself in a mystical adventure.

He had to help Yumi quickly, so he could get to Kilahito and report that nightmare. Unless he could find a way to send a message. For now, he focused on Yumi. How could he fix her problem? She needed a painting?

Then his mind drifted a bit. Back to when he'd opened his eyes briefly and seen her standing there in the pool…her hair and skin glistening in the light…

Wait.

"Wait!" he said, splashing and righting himself, opening his eyes by instinct to double-check. "Yumi, your hair is wet!"

She opened her own eyes, then stood and touched her long black hair. Which *was* wet.

"Why?" he asked. "You can't touch anything else, but you can touch the water?"

She frowned. "I…didn't *feel* like I was getting wet when I stepped into the pool. I felt nothing, like when I tried to touch the blanket or the wall. Now though, I *do* feel it. I'm floating. I feel the water's

coolness like every other time I've entered a pool like this." She cocked her head. "It means something. You're right."

They met one another's eyes. Then, at basically the same moment, they realized where they were and what they weren't wearing. Both blushed and squeezed their eyes closed.

Yes, I know.

But you were once young and nervous too. We all were. There's nothing wrong with being a tad awkward. It is a sign of a new experience—and new experiences are among the cosmere's best forms of emotional leavening. We shouldn't be so afraid of showing inexperience. Cynicism isn't interesting; it is often no more than a mask we place over tedium.

"Your attendants have dressed and are returning to dry you, hero," Yumi said softly. "They will wait until you're ready—it is traditional to allow you time here. I will get dressed, then turn and let you know you may approach."

The water sloshed a bit as she left the pool. True to her word, she called out a short time later. He opened his eyes and found her dressed in her nightgown again, with her back toward him.

Reminding himself that he wasn't *actually* exposing himself to the attendants, Painter climbed out of the pool and let the women dry him. One had prepared new clothing, even more ornate than what he'd been wearing before. An undergarment followed by one of the bell-shaped skirts, with a separate top that came down over it in a matching—but darker—color. Bow across the front, though that was less to hold it together and more to ornament the ensemble.

The clothing was made of a stiff, starchy silk that practically crinkled when handled. It was all so loose that it fit him, though he was several inches taller than Yumi and far from her measurements.

He did notice that her own phantom clothing, now replaced, was darkened with the water seeping through from her skin. She hadn't had a towel to dry herself. How had the water gotten her wet, then gotten her ghostly *clothing* wet?

He tried to think of an explanation, but once more began to feel strangely tired. As the women tied Painter's bow, the odd sensation increased, accompanied by nausea. That heat from the sky…the heat from below…the layers of clothing…

It all came together in an otherworldly moment his body was *not* prepared to handle. Heroic or not, Painter swayed, felt his vision go dark, then fainted.

HE BLINKED AWAKE to the sound of pounding on a door.

Painter groaned and found himself on his futon. He shook his head, looking around his apartment. Strewn with clothing, a half-eaten box of cereal on the table, hion lights—teal and magenta—shining from the line outside his window, painting the place familiar modern colors.

It had been a dream after all?

The door continued to thump angrily. "Coming!" he shouted as the beating persisted. "I said I'm coming!" He shifted, sitting up, and put his hand to his head.

Yumi sat up from the floor beside his futon, dressed in a pair of *his* pajamas—the oversized shirt exposing her shoulder, the sleeves long enough that her hands barely stuck out the ends. Her hair was a frizzy mess, and she looked baffled.

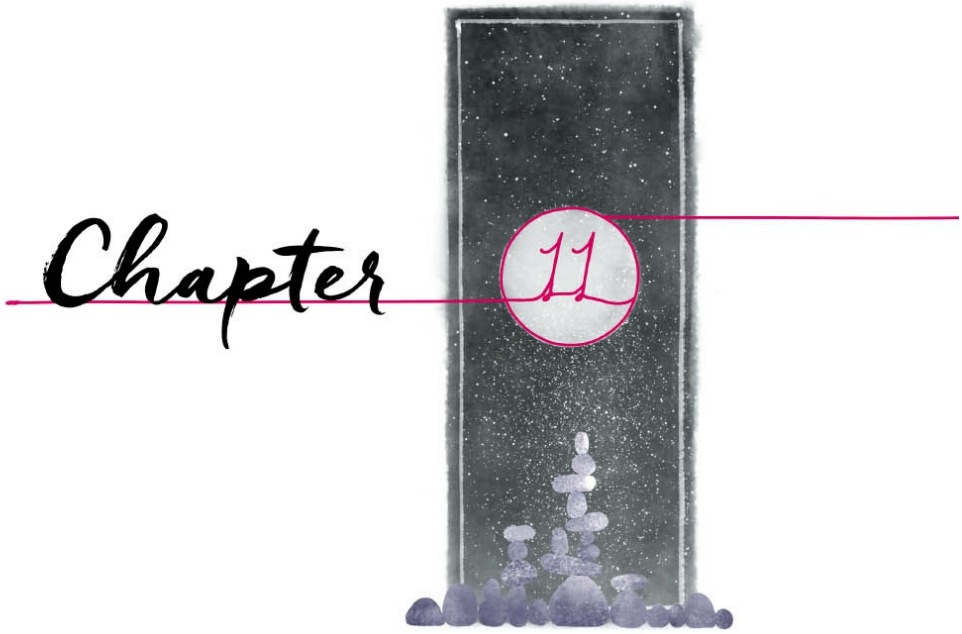
He gaped, then reached for her. His arm passed through the edge of his short dining table.

Painter froze, then waved his hand through the table. He couldn't touch it. Or the sock that was sitting on it for some reason. Or the pillow, or…

Yumi stumbled to her feet, knocking against the table, causing an old noodle bowl to rattle and one

of the maipon sticks to fall off it and clatter to the wood. She glanced at it, then at her hands, then met his eyes with her own panicked ones.

Oh *no*.



YUMI WAS IN the darkest place of dead spirits.

That was the only explanation for the strange hostile lights coming in through the window—not warm like the sun, instead cold and terrible. That was the only explanation for the chill air, particularly under her bare feet.

The door thumped and rattled. Some beast was out there. No, some terrible force from beyond life.

She must be dead. But if that was so, why was she so very hungry? She felt like she'd been *weeks* without food. Was that another part of the torture? Had…had she been taken to the cold skies, where the souls of the unworthy drifted? Was she forbidden the embrace of the warm earth below? Was… was she *that* bad a yoki-hijo? Had she failed the spirits that terribly?

Nearby, the hero groaned.

The hero. He was here. Hope surged. Was this part of their quest? She'd learned in the histories that many heroes traveled to the place of cold, frozen spirits. She tried to contain her terror and make herself feel strong. Perhaps this was what the spirits wanted. Maybe…maybe she wasn't dead, but on their path?

The door pounded again, louder.

"Nikaro!" a voice shouted outside. "You answer this door!"

"Great," the hero said (lowly). "It's the foreman. Yumi…you're going to have to answer that."

"What?" she said, her voice going shrill.

"I can't touch things," he said, proving it by waving his hand through a table beside the strange altar he'd been lying on when they awoke. He then seemed to notice her confusion. "This is my room in my world, Yumi. Like I was in yours?"

"Your…world?" she said. "You live in the land of frozen souls? The land of the sky?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Are we dead?" she whispered.

"I…don't think so. But if the foreman is forced to break in here, he might strangle one of us…"

The door pounded once more. "I can hear you talking in there!" the terrible voice shouted. Some kind of demon, perhaps half person, half animal. Yumi stepped back, and only then realized what she was wearing. Some kind of loose trousers and a buttoned shirt, made of a thick but soft material.

She gasped. You could see the exact *shape* of her— That and the curve of her—

"Yumi," the hero said. "Look at me. Are you all right?"

"No!" she said. She glanced around again, and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness—it must be night here, but what was that strange light?—she picked out things she hadn't seen earlier. Wadded-up clothing on the floor. Unwashed bowls in piles on a counter. Refuse.

The hero…was a slob?

Well, of course he wasn't. Heroes didn't clean up after themselves. Servants did that. So his servants had grown lax in his absence. This *was* a small room. Surely this wasn't his sole quarters. She leaned toward the window and glanced outside. There she saw a dauntingly dark sky. No stars at all. A grim *nothing* up above that felt eager to swallow her. But she was in some kind of large building.

A palace? It was certainly bigger than any building she'd ever been in before. Yet the street was *lined* with them. A dozen or more palaces in a row! Taller than steamwell eruptions. How did these buildings get so big—ten stories—without collapsing? How did they live without heat from the ground?

It's the land of the heroes, she thought. *Rules are different here.* It was colder and darker than she'd imagined, but at least she *probably* wasn't dead.

The door thundered again.

"Go," the hero said. "Answer it and get rid of him."

"I can't answer the door like this." She gestured to her outfit. "The clothing outlines my form! It's so immodest!"

"Yumi, we were *just* taking a bath."

"In the service of the spirits," she said, increasingly frantic. "Ritual cleansing. That's *completely different*!"

"He'll see you as me," the hero said. "Don't you understand? Everyone looked at me and saw you. Now I'm the one that's incorporeal. They won't see *you* being immodest."

It was…a valid point. So, trying to control her anxiety, shoving aside her famishing hunger, she stepped to the door and eased it open. Doing that for herself would have been a novelty if the situation were different. Now she barely gave it a thought as she found a giant of a white-haired older man on the other side. He wore thick trousers and a buttoned shirt made of some material she didn't recognize.

He froze immediately, fixating on her. "What the… ?" He looked past her into the little room. "Well, slap me silly," he muttered. "Would never have expected to find a girl answering Nikaro's door…"

Yumi stiffened.

He saw her.

He saw *her*?

Painter groaned behind her. But this foreman seemed unable to see him, for he focused again only

on Yumi. “Where is he?”

“Tell him I’m sick!” Painter said, sounding panicked.

“He’s sick!” she said quickly, then felt a stab of anguish at the untruth. Liyun would be disappointed in her.

“Huh,” the foreman said, narrowing his eyes. “You…all right? Everything good here?”

“I…” Then she drew in a breath and gave a deep ritual bow of conciliation. “O great being of the cold skies, forgive any slight or offense I have given. It is not my intent. Please ask of me what you will. I will do all in my power to see it delivered to you.”

“Oh. Uh…” The foreman shuffled from one foot to the other. “Just, have him report in, okay? He didn’t do his rounds yesterday, and we’re already short-staffed. He’s supposed to send word if he’s sick.”

“I will see this message delivered with all due soberness and courage,” Yumi whispered, lowering her bow. “Please go with the blessing of the spirits and find peace in your life.”

“Thanks,” he muttered, sounding…embarrassed?

“Wait,” Painter said, stepping up beside her. “You need to tell him something important. Um, repeat this. ‘Painter says he saw a stable nightmare, and—despite being sick—is so diligent at his job that he is out hunting to get more information. He wanted me to inform you that this is an emergency, and that you must send for the Dreamwatch.’ ”

She repeated the words exactly as spoken and glanced up from her bow. The foreman frowned deeply.

“He said that?” the man asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “I vow it.” She knelt and touched her forehead to the floor in solemn consummation of the words.

“Huh. Right, okay then,” the foreman said, then tromped away down the hallway.

“Thank you,” Painter said, relief evident in his voice. “That’s one thing taken care of, at least. I can stop worrying.”

Yumi stood upright, glancing down the hallway as the foreman vanished. She felt herself blushing with the heat of a thousand stones.

A man had seen her. Like *this*. Not merely wearing…whatever this was she was wearing, but also with her hair disheveled. She was supposed to represent the spirits in every way, but today she would have had trouble properly representing a pile of *dust*.

“That was strange,” the hero said, wandering around the room. “Why did he see you, Yumi? None of this makes any kind of sense.”

Yumi moved to close the door, but as she did, a door directly across the hallway opened. And a goddess stepped out. Wearing almost no clothing at all.

Her skirt ended *mid-thigh*, and was made of some kind of glossy black material. Her shirt was filmy and drooped low, exposing the depth of her bosom. Yumi would have thought her a demon but for her beauty. The woman was perhaps Yumi’s age, but her black hair shone with a luster that no amount of combing would *ever* provide Yumi. She wore makeup that—instead of lightening her face to pale white, as was used for formal situations in Torio—outlined her eyes in dark colors, making them wide and inviting. Her lips were cherry red, her cheeks dusted with a hint of blush.

Yumi gaped at the gorgeous person, barely noticing when Painter cried out behind her, then waved his incorporeal hands through the door as if to try to shut it.

The woman turned to Yumi and paused, then cocked her head. “Oh,” she said, taking in Yumi’s state of dress. “Um…hello. Are you…a friend of Nikaro’s?”

"She's going to think we're sleeping together," Painter said. "This is bad. She'll *never* talk to me again. Quick, uh, tell her you're my sister!"

"I'm his sister," Yumi whispered. "Yumi."

Then immediately panicked.

Her earlier lie about Painter being sick had been a…stretch of the truth. He was sick in a way—he was incorporeal. So while it wasn't strictly the sort of behavior proper for a yoki-hijo, she could rationalize it.

This was different. This was a deliberate untruth. The sort that she'd never spoken since having impressed upon her—as a toddler—the gravity of her duties and the requirements of the spirits. She cringed, expecting the spirits to rise up and destroy her. She had to be better than such behaviors.

However, no divine recrimination seized her.

The woman across the hall relaxed. "Of course you are," she said, evidently amused that she'd considered otherwise. "That makes sense. I'm Akane. Are you visiting Nikaro for the first time?"

"Yes," Painter said quickly. "Tell her that you came to see the big city."

Yumi repeated the words, numb. Maybe…well, if the hero was telling her to say these things, maybe they didn't *count* as lies. After all, the spirits had sent him to her. He must know what he was doing. So instead of worrying, she tried to figure out this woman with the strange dress and kindly smile.

"Close the door," Painter said.

Instead Yumi asked the woman, "Do you know Painter well?"

"What, Nikaro?" the woman asked. "Well, I knew him in school, and we live across from each other. So…I suppose, maybe?"

Yumi frowned, cocking her head. But then it clicked. Akane lived in his palace. She dressed like this. Painter was concerned she'd think that Yumi was sleeping with him.

"Oh!" Yumi said. "You must be one of his concubines!"

"His *what*?" Akane asked.

Painter groaned, flopping back onto the altar he'd been lying on before.

"He told me that he'd been with *many* women," Yumi said. "Er, intimately, I mean. A hero like him has many such conquests in stories. I apologize for my blush. I am…not experienced. He explained it to me when we were bathing together earlier. He told me all about the hundreds of women he'd been with! I should have realized when I saw you that you were one of his concubines!"

Yumi bowed. It was only proper to show the concubine of an important hero such deference. When she came up from her bow, however, she noticed the look of disgust on Akane's face. Which quickly became a look of violent anger, Akane's nose wrinkling in a sneer.

"He said all of that," Akane said, her voice as cold as the air in this strange place.

"I…" Oh no. She'd misjudged, hadn't she? Perhaps this was a woman he'd known intimately, but hadn't made his concubine. That would explain her anger. Except something about the way she was fuming…"You're…not one of his conquests?" Yumi asked.

"Girl," Akane said, "your brother has trouble conquering a bowl of noodles if it has too much spice."

"He's…a mighty hero though. Right?" Yumi asked.

In the other room, Painter groaned louder.

"Hero?" Akane laughed. Then she turned and stalked away down the corridor, wearing shoes that did *not* look like they would survive the ground's heat. But then, Yumi was beginning to think maybe this place wasn't *ever* hot.

She shut the door, then put her back to it. "I…did poorly, didn't I?" she asked.

Painter just continued staring at the ceiling.

"Painter," Yumi said, "are you a hero? Like you've been telling me?"

"I…"

"*Painter,*" she said, her voice growing firm as she stepped toward him. "Have you been telling me *untruths*?"

He turned his head and met her eyes. "Look," he said, "I'm a very good painter. Well…okay, I'm a weak painter. But I'm capable enough, right? So you said you needed someone like me, and I figured…"

He held her eyes a moment, then turned away with obvious shame, flopping back down on his altar again.

"It's not my fault," he muttered, "what you assumed."

Yumi felt a crushing sensation inside her, something squeezing the air from her lungs, her chest constricting.

He wasn't… She…

She gasped in and out for several breaths, then sat on the floor. It wasn't warm. How did they live without warmth underneath to bolster them?

"What was I supposed to do?" Painter said. "I got home from work, and next thing I knew, I was in your world. In your *body*. And there you were, asking for help. And I do consider myself kind of heroic, you know? So…"

"You lied," she said. "You *lied*. And now…now I have no idea what's going on. I thought the spirits sent you to me, and…and that you'd know what to do…and…" She focused on him. "And you peeked at me when I was bathing!"

"*You* peeked at *me*."

"You're not a holy vessel chosen by the spirits!" she said. "*I am.* I…I need to stack something."

She stormed through the small chamber, gathering up bowls of various sizes, some plates, other kitchen…things. She didn't really know what went into cooking. She'd never done it before.

She plopped down on the cold, lifeless floor near his table, which was low like the ones she knew. Why make low tables if the floor was *cold*?

Her stomach growled.

She ignored it, instead stacking the dishes. And mind you, this wasn't normal stacking. No simple largest-to-smallest tower. No, this was expert-level ceremonial, *artistic* stacking. With a vengeful air.

Painter watched her, transfixed as the stack grew higher. Then he sat up, staring as she positioned several bowls on their edges, with maipon sticks used to balance them and make the stack seem to teeter on stilts—though if you were to touch it, you'd have found it surprisingly sturdy.

"Wow," Painter eventually said.

Yumi ignored him. She waited, praying, hoping the spirits would see this creation and visit. Offer wisdom, explain what they wanted of her. Why was she here in this terrible place? Why had they sent her a liar instead of a hero?

No spirits visited. She felt nothing other than a ravenous hunger. "I need something to eat," she said.

"Rice cakes in the cupboard maybe?" he said, waving. "Some dry instant noodles. You can eat them raw. I do."

She followed his vague gesture. The food she found—wrapped in a strange clear material she was too famished to wonder about—proved to be a nasty, crunchy substance, like something proper that

had been left on the ground to steam for far, far too long.

She ate the entire thing anyway, then carried five more cakes—all he had left—back to the table and continued eating. Why hadn't the spirits answered her? Did they not exist in this place? Were they ignoring her offering?

Or…or was there a more terrible answer? Maybe they'd rescinded her gift, taken from her the blessing of being the yoki-hijo. The possibility terrified her.

"That's amazing," Painter said, still staring at her tower. "How did you manage to (highly) stack them *rim on rim* like that?"

"I managed nothing," she whispered around bites of strange rations, "save the exercise of the talents the spirits gave me. I am nothing. Merely a vessel for their will."

"Look," he said. "I'm sorry that—"

"I do not want to hear your lies, nor your excuses for lies," she said. "Please keep both to yourself."

"Fine."

A moment later the building trembled (as it often did when a bus passed by outside). That was enough to shift the balance of the stack, and it came tumbling straight down in a clatter of wood and ceramic. Yumi, even in her state, was shocked it didn't all break and shatter.

"Sorry," Painter whispered.

"The creations are unstable," she replied, "unless blessed by the spirits. Which mine…might never be again…"

She wiped crumbs from her mouth, then pulled her arms close, feeling like she was shrinking down into her strange clothing. Wishing she could vanish.

But she had not been chosen because she was weak. She had to believe—at least had to pretend—that she could fix her situation.

"So…what now?" Painter asked. "Not to sound rude, but you *basically* ruined my chances with Akane back there. I've been working on repairing my relationship with her for *months*. I'd rather not let you put a wrecking ball through the rest of my life."

"The spirits came to me," she replied, "and said they needed help. I have to believe they picked me for something special, regardless of how this looks or feels. But why did they pick *you* to help me?"

"Beats me," he said (lowly). He sat up, then heaved a sigh. "I need to know how much time I lost. I felt like I was on your world only a few hours, but the foreman says I didn't check in for an entire day."

"How do you know what day it is here?" she asked. "Do you check the stars?"

"The *star*, you mean?" he asked. "Your planet is the only thing we can see in the sky here. It wouldn't tell us anything even if I could see it right now." He stood up and moved to a piece of glass affixed to one wall. He tried to touch it, then muttered softly as his hand passed through it. "I keep forgetting. Here, come turn this knob."

She did so, making two lines of light—soft purple and blue—appear behind the glass. They vibrated and shook, taking on the shapes of…people? Yes, small people barely two feet high, but incredibly detailed. Sound came from the glass as the two people talked—a woman made of the blue, and a man made of the violet.

"—But your brother," the woman said, moving to touch the man's arm. The image grew more detailed, zooming in on her face, though it remarkably appeared to all be made of a single continuous line. "What will he say?"

"Lee? Why should I (lowly) care what *he* says? I live my own life. I have to."

"Ah," Painter said. "*Times of the Night*. That means it's Samday evening. I haven't seen this episode, so it's the first showing. So I missed one day, didn't report to work last night, and the foreman came to check on me in the evening."

Yumi settled on the floor and stared at the moving lines with wide eyes. "How… What happened to those people? Why did they turn into lines of light?"

Painter chuckled. "They're fine. Those two are actors. You know, like a play? You've seen a play, right?"

She shook her head. "Too frivolous for a yoki-hijo," she whispered. "But I've heard of them."

"Don't you get *any* time to relax?"

"I have plenty of time to meditate and pray."

"No, I mean…have fun?"

"If I waste time having fun, people starve," she said, still watching the two figures made of light. "How are actors doing this?"

"They're standing in another place," Painter explained, "and projecting onto the hion lines. Uh…I don't know how it works. Kind of like a photograph, maybe?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Right," he said. "I guess you don't have those. Just…imagine a pair of people standing in a room somewhere acting out this play. And these lines mimic the actions they're making. Anyone in the city with a hion viewer can watch."

"Is…that what the glass is? A hion viewer?"

"Nah, the viewer is these boxes on the side, which manipulates the shape of the lines. The glass is to keep you from touching the hion."

She nodded absently, mesmerized. The play, she pieced together, was about a man who had woken up one day without memories. This was important because he'd been the only one who knew the location of a fantastic treasure. But the story didn't seem to be about the treasure. It was about all the different people trying to persuade the man that they'd been his good friend, and about the man piecing together the fragments of who he'd once been and discovering—bit by bit—who was actually an ally and who was lying.

She knew that she should have been doing something else. Meditating, at the very least. But for some reason the story *connected* to her. The man with a blank life. Everything he tried was new…

She was so tired. Overwhelmed. There was something incredibly *therapeutic* about sitting, pulling a blanket around herself, and watching someone else's problems for a while.

When the story finished she gasped softly. "It can't end there!" she said. "What is in the safe?"

"It always does this," Painter said. "Every time. It ends right before it's going to reveal something important or interesting. I think they want to make it so you have to watch the next episode."

"We *have* to!" she said. "When is it?"

"This one is weekly," he said. "Some are daily, others every other day. For this, the actors have other obligations, so they can only do it once in a while."

"A whole *week*?"

The spirits were surely punishing her.

Yumi pulled the blanket close, trying to keep warm. Maybe this was for the best. She wouldn't be distracted by the story…except the lines remarkably started vibrating again and forming new shapes.

"It's returning!" she said.

"That's the next program," he said. "*Seasons of Regret*. It's one of the best."

"Another program… How many are there?"

"A different one every hour," he said. "All day. Though in the late night and early morning, they're mostly reruns. Which is nice, in case you miss an episode."

Every hour? All day?

This device was dangerous. She reached up and flipped it off before it could draw her in. She *had* to focus on her predicament. The spirits needed her.

"Did anything happen to you?" she said. "Anything unusual before you woke up, having stolen my body?"

"I didn't *steal* anything," he said, lying back on his plush altar, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. To be honest, Yumi was feeling a little worn out herself.

"There *was* something," he eventually continued. "Like I had you tell the foreman. A nightmare—one that was almost fully corporeal. That's rare. I've never seen one like that."

"Nightmare?" Yumi said, frowning. "You were asleep?"

"Nightmares walk in my world, Yumi," he said. As if that weren't the most terrifying thing someone had ever said. But he seemed unafraid. So maybe he wasn't a complete waste. "But normally they're formless, without the strength or ability to hurt people. I told you, I'm a nightmare painter. My kind keep them in control."

"That…actually does sound a little heroic," she admitted.

"See?" he said, sitting up. Then he wilted. "But I'm not a warrior. We use ink, and…it's normally not dangerous. Boring and mundane, really. But I did encounter one. The foreman will take care of it though. Send for experts that…"

He stood up suddenly, causing her to yelp and pull back.

"The Dreamwatch!" he said. "They're warriors, Yumi. They fight stable nightmares. Maybe if they come to the city, we can talk to them about your problem. Maybe the spirits want us to meet with them?" He hesitated. "That doesn't make sense though. How would they help with your world? And why wouldn't the spirits send one of *them* to you instead of me? So…I don't know."

Yumi nodded, though she was barely listening. She found her mind oddly cloudy. She…she had to…

Suddenly she was tired. Incredibly tired. Though she intended to respond to Painter, she instead stretched and curled up on the floor, nestled in the blanket. And fell asleep.

YUMI AWOKE TO delightful warmth underneath her back. As her eyes fluttered open and she moved to sit, her hand—unfortunately—passed through the floor.

She could feel the warmth, but her body was again incorporeal. Next to her Painter sat up, disturbing blankets, wearing one of her thick, enveloping sleeping gowns. He looked toward the window, where sunlight streamed in, and groaned.

"I guess," he said, "we're going to have to do something about that bathing issue…"

Chapter 12

I'VE OFTEN WONDERED at the purpose of nightmares. Again, the normal kind, not the stalking kind. Why do we have them? Is there a point?

Maybe it's a brutal way of making us more resilient.

Humans are incredibly malleable. Despite my breadth of experience, I've never stopped being surprised at how durable human beings can be. They can survive in almost any environment. They can recover from debilitating loss. They can be crushed physically, mentally, emotionally—and still ask you how your day is going.

Perhaps nightmares are Cultivation's method of giving us a way of surviving trauma in a strangely safe environment. (At least safe physically.) A way to put it behind us, forget the details, but retain the growth. Nightmares are vicarious living done in our own minds.

In that way, nightmares serve much the same function as storytellers. Evolution doing a favor for those who, unlucky and unfortunate, never encountered me.

Painter finished his meal and barely managed to keep himself from wiping his mouth—his attendants had to do that for him.

Yumi paced behind him, invisible to everyone else. She'd barely spoken to him since they'd awoken. He kept trying to catch her eye, but she ignored him like one would a bad scent made by someone too important to stink.

Eventually the two attendants retreated—and were replaced by Liyun, in her strict formal outfit, her hairstyle impeccably symmetrical. There was a certain art to the way she loomed over him. He wondered if she practiced. How else would one explain her perfect posture, looking down at him without tipping her head, which made even the act of studying him seem like a huge inconvenience.

The way she folded her arms to make her shadow expand across him, isolating him in darkness. The way she lingered *just* a tad longer than was comfortable…

It was impressive. Like a beautiful gourmet dish. Made from mud.

She settled down on her knees. "The people of the town," she said, "are concerned about you, following your…episode yesterday."

"I'm…sorry?" Painter said.

"I doubt I need to explain," Liyun continued, "the indignity it would bring upon them to be refused the blessings of the spirits. They would see it as a terrible omen. They would be the town that caused the yoki-hijo to collapse. The shame would run deep, Chosen."

"Look," Painter said, "it's not like I fainted on *purpose* just to—"

"*No,*" Yumi said stepping up to him.

He turned, frowning. She was finally acknowledging him? He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off.

"You will repeat *only* the words I say," she told him. "You are not to interact with Liyun without my *explicit* guidance."

"But—"

"*You*," she said, "will *repeat* only the *words I say*."

He had admired Liyun's ability to loom. But in one moment, Yumi eclipsed her master. She stepped up to him, eyes wide, daring, hands in tense fists. *Threatening.*

Painter felt a sudden jolt of disconnect. He was…elevated, you might say, to a higher realm of understanding. Like a child painter who at long last gained enough skill to see the true artistry of a master, Painter was confronted by looming that was somehow more grandiose. While Liyun had loomed with exactness, it had felt performative.

Yumi was passionate. The timid girl who had bowed before the foreman had now been completely consumed by…this creature. He'd faced nightmares, but in that moment he would have chosen to defy any of them before he did Yumi.

He nodded.

"Honored attendant," Yumi said, nodding for him to repeat the words—which he did. "The failing is entirely mine. My flesh has been made weak by my foolishness two days ago, when I overextended myself. My soul, however, trusts in the spirits. It is my deepest wish to continue my duties today. I will give all effort to avoid a repeat of yesterday's failing."

Painter finished the recitation. Which he admitted was likely a better way of handling Liyun. He'd never been particularly good at apologizing for things that weren't his fault. To be honest, he'd never been that good at apologizing for things that *were* his fault…

He gave a bow as Yumi indicated he should. When he looked up, he was surprised to see Liyun *considering*. She actually seemed to need to *deliberate* whether or not Yumi deserved forgiveness. For fainting. After pushing herself to serve while *obviously* unwell.

What kind of twisted society produced people who thought this was reasonable?

Liyun finally nodded. "You are wise, as always, elevated one. We will pretend that yesterday is unworthy of attention. Come, let us proceed with a *proper* day's summoning."

She led the way out, and Yumi glared at Painter until he wordlessly followed. As they trekked through the town, obscured by the fans, he was again left wondering how these people lived in this sweltering *heat*. Even with the clogs lifting his feet from the ground, he felt it radiating, making his bell-shaped skirt ripple with thermals. Perhaps that was why they used such thick cloth—to prevent accidents.

He kept his composure despite the heat, until they reached the base of the rise leading to the cold spring. Then a sudden noise like an explosion from near the center of the town made Painter spin, gaping as a jet of superheated water erupted and sprayed some thirty or forty feet into the air. The entire procession stopped to let him watch.

It was like the ground was so inhospitable that the very laws of nature were corrupted. Instead of falling from the sky, water came *up* from *below*. It dispersed, part becoming steam, releasing a rumble and even a faint whine—as if tortured.

"What (lowly) is *wrong* with this place?" he whispered.

Yumi stepped between him and the sight. "Continue," she said firmly.

"But—"

"A yoki-hijo does *not* break composure," she said. "A yoki-hijo remains controlled, calm, and deliberate. If something startles you, look down or away. Do not stare. Do not gawk. You are not here to indulge. You are here to serve."

"I," he hissed, "am *not* a yoki-hijo."

"No," she said in the lowest form of speech, reserved for speaking of things like the slime between your toes. "You are a *liar*."

She held his gaze until he turned away and continued the procession. Painter found himself simmering, a little like the superheated water. Yes, he'd…overstated some things. But he didn't deserve this kind of treatment. He'd offered to help. Were those the actions of a *liar*? Of someone who deserved the lowest form of speech?

They reached the cold spring. He stood and thrust his hands to the sides until his attendants removed his clothing. Then he shut his eyes—without even glancing at Yumi—and strode into the bath. There he suffered the ministrations of the attendants while stewing in the broth of the not-so-cool spring.

Was it too much to want acknowledgment of how tough this was for him? Some thankfulness for his willingness to help? Though he might not have recognized it at the time, these were familiar thoughts. Characteristic, even. They weren't *wrong*—though a thought can be correct but still unhealthy.

The several scrub-downs with various soaps and scents, anointing and preparing him, took longer than he remembered. Followed by that long dunk according to Yumi's order. Finally the attendants withdrew. He lingered—half floating, half standing. Enjoying the water, trying to let it wash away his bad attitude.

And eventually…well, he ended up peeking.

He found Yumi standing right in front of him, eye to eye, so close that if she'd been corporeal he would have felt her breath. He jumped despite himself, splashing away.

Had…had she been doing that the entire time? Staring at him? Glaring? Just waiting to see if he peeked?

(The answer is yes. Yumi was, as you might have noticed, a special kind of stubborn.)

Painter's first inclination was to take in the sights. She stood there completely unashamed, in direct—or shall we say *stark*—contrast to how she'd been acting while wearing his pajamas. Despite not striking the most intimidating of postures—standing waist-deep in a pool of water, her wet hair plastered to her skin—there was *confidence* in her eyes.

So, deliberately not ogling, Painter met her gaze. He stepped toward her, leaning forward until he feared touching noses and experiencing that surreal warmth again.

She could glare, yes. Even loom with aplomb, despite being shorter than him. But Painter was an artist, and one thing artists learned to do was *look*. There's something unnerving about the stare of someone trained in shadows, shapes, and anatomy. An artist has a gaze like a knife, separating the layers of skin, fat, and muscle. His were the eyes of a person who could rip out your soul and recreate it on the page in ink or graphite.

After a minute of this, Yumi's eyes narrowed and her lips cocked slightly to the side. While there are many ways to interpret that kind of expression, Painter picked the right one. This time it was a mark of surprise that he'd held the stare—accompanied by the very faintest measure of respect.

"So," he said, "is this what we're going to do all day?"

"The spirits picked you," she said. "And then they sent you to me. I *have* to believe that they were correct to do so. To accept otherwise is to accept that *I* was chosen for no purpose—and that is lunacy."

"All right," he said. "But that doesn't tell us what we're supposed to *do*."

"We have to commune with them," she said. "Which means *you* have to summon them. I can't—not without being able to touch the things around me. We bring them to us, and maybe that will be enough to prove ourselves. Perhaps that alone will end this…association the two of us have been forced into."

"And if it isn't enough?"

"Then the first step is *still* to summon them," she said. "So we can get some answers. Spirits who have been formed and dedicated to a service can no longer speak—or perhaps they choose not to. But newly summoned ones can; they respond when I make requests of them. Our best hope is to learn from them what they want of us."

"Fine," he said, leaning a little closer.

"*Fine,*" she said, leaning even closer.

A contest of pride, then. He leaned in a titch. She responded. Then he got just a hair's distance from her, smiling, as there was no space remaining.

So she inched forward and stubbornly touched her nose to his.

Enveloping warmth.

Understanding.

A sharing of frustration, anger, confusion.

Connection.

Passion.

They both splashed backward, and Painter gasped. It was completely unfair how—

"Aargh!" Yumi shouted at the sky. "It is *ridiculously* unfair how…distracting that feels!" Then she looked at him, glaring still, and sullenly sank into the water down to her chin, covering herself as best as one could under the circumstances. She didn't blink once as she did it.

"Don't stare," she muttered.

"Stare?" he said, turning away, feigning indifference. "At what? There'd need to be something worth looking at before I'd be tempted to stare, Yumi."

Then, because he wasn't actually a heel despite what saying those words implied, he felt guilty. He walked out of the pool, telling himself—and his blush—that he didn't care if she watched him. Chaeyung and Hwanji approached, bringing him towels and clothing.

"Just don't faint this time!" Yumi called from behind. "We have work to do today, liar."

Chapter 13

YUMI WAS DAUNTED by the number of towns she'd visited but couldn't name. She was a servant of the people of Torio; shouldn't she be able to *name* the places she'd helped?

Yet she saw so little of them. Only their cold springs—or bathhouses, for those that didn't have a spring—and their shrines and places of ritual. The different towns blurred together, interchangeable in her memory. At times she almost thought they could be the same town over and over—that she went to sleep and her wagon was pulled around in circles to give the illusion of motion before stopping right back where she'd begun.

She was ashamed of that thought, because the places were important and unique to the people who lived in them. Take this shrine, where Painter knelt today per her instructions. Most shrines were in gardens, with cold stone so the flowers could spin low to the ground.

This one was instead in the middle of an orchard. Nearby, trees drifted and bumped against one another, chained in place to keep them from floating off but given enough slack to always be in motion. The air was cooler than she liked, and the dim light of the sun behind so many branches reminded her of Painter's world. However, this was a different *kind* of dimness: broken up instead of absolute, like sunlight made festive. The trees in turn were spangled with fruit. The celebration here was a quiet one.

Though the workers had been cleared out to give the yoki-hijo silence for her meditations, this was plainly a cultivated spot. Any fallen fruit had been collected before it could bake into sticky tar. People worked in here frequently.

Which meant the people of this town didn't strictly obey tradition by setting the shrine off from commonly trafficked areas. She'd seen it before, and…well, a rebellious part of her approved. These

people wanted their shrine near as they worked. There were spirit statues on the roof, created by a yoki-hijo to have no purpose beyond watching over the workers to give them comfort.

Why shouldn't people adapt tradition to their needs? It was a dangerous line of thinking—so when Liyun noted the cultivated trees and the statues on the roof of the shrine, she frowned. Then, fortunately, she bowed and withdrew—leaving the yoki-hijo to her ritual prayers.

As Liyun retreated, Painter let out a long sigh. "Something's wrong with that woman."

"Liyun-*nimi*," Yumi said, "is an *immaculate* warden. You will expunge such terrible ideas from your mind."

"Why?" he said. "It's not like I'm saying it to her face."

"Thinking it is as bad," Yumi said. "You are a yoki-hijo. *You* are better than such thoughts. You must be pure, not just in action, but in *mind* and *soul*."

"But—"

"Complaining is for those lesser. Back straight. Head bowed."

"I'm not a yoki-hijo."

"Today you are," she said, walking around him as he knelt in the open-sided shrine. "If you want to end this, you must do what I cannot. Beyond that, there are consequences—rarely implemented—for a yoki-hijo who cannot serve. We are in danger of provoking Liyun to extreme measures, which will make it impossible for us to accomplish our goals. So unless you want to be stuck like this forever, you need to follow the protocol and *do* what I *tell* you."

He let out a long, annoyed breath. "Fine," he said (lowly).

Yumi nodded. During her bathing she had come to a realization. A reason why the spirits might have sent this seemingly useless person to take her place. Shortly they would test her theory. But first, meditation.

"Now," she said, "you will say the proper prayers. Because you are new to this, we will say only the six that are strictly necessary."

"Six?" he said. "How long will this take?"

"Half an hour," she said. "Roughly."

"A half hour of *praying*? But—"

"Do you want out or not?"

He grumbled, but as she began to recite the prayers, he repeated them. She wondered if perhaps she should be kneeling too. So she knelt beside him, hands laced in the pattern of reverence before her, head bowed. It would give him a good model at the least.

Was it the words or the heart that mattered in a prayer? Perhaps the spirits would accept his words and her heart.

The half hour was over in no time—saying only six of the prayers was novel, and barely felt like it was enough. But at the end Painter groaned as if she'd made him do something terrible, like carry his own luggage. He flopped to the side, and she decided to let him rest before making him—

"Hey!" she snapped. "Don't close your eyes."

"Just for a moment," he said, his eyelids flickering.

"If you fall asleep, we might swap again!"

"You don't *know* that's true…" he mumbled.

So she did the only thing she could think of to wake him. She stuck her finger through the middle of his forehead.

The immediate effect was that overwhelming warmth, spreading through her body with a ripple—a tingling *shiver* riding before it, like a flower on a thermal. Then the blurring of self, that connection to

him. She felt his fatigue, his concern, his frustration. His emotions washed against hers, mixing like overlapping prayers—blurring together, but still distinct.

It wasn't *terrible*. But it was unnerving, as it mashed them both together in a way that was utterly unnatural.

He sat bolt upright, pulling away from her. "Hey! What are you (lowly) *doing*?"

"Keeping you awake," she said. "We must meet the spirits. You can't afford to nap."

He huffed, but stood and shook his arms, the moment of drowsiness apparently past. "Fine. Let's get on with it."

"We have to meditate," she said, "until the ritual time."

"Ritual time," he said. "Ritual bathing, ritual clothing, ritual place. When do I get my ritual tote bag? My ritual underpants? Ritual fingernail clipper?"

"Levity," she said, "is *not* becoming of a yoki-hijo. Your duty is to our people. To make light of your position is to make light of their lives."

"It's a shame then," he said gravely, "that their lives are all so (lowly) ridiculous that mockery is inevitable."

"Enough!" she shouted, pointing at him. "You *will* take this seriously."

"What happened to you?" he muttered, backing away before she could poke him again. "I liked the demure version of you better."

"Nothing *happened* to me," she said. "This is who I am. The person I *have* to *be*. If I grow lax, then people die, Painter. Do you understand that? Farming among my people *ends* without the yoki-hijo. If I am not my best self, then people will *starve*. Forgive me if it's a little *stressful*, therefore, that I can't do my duty without the cooperation of a liar who finds all this funny!"

He glanced away, looking ashamed. As he should have been. This was the way she'd been trained—with relentless conditioning toward solemnity. With unyielding strictness. Until the desire for levity and individuality had been drained from her like pus from a boil.

It had worked for her. She'd turned out fine. Rather, she'd turned out to be what she had to be.

It would work for him. She merely had to remain stern. For his good and the good of the spirits as well.

"We wait, then," he finally said.

"We meditate," she said, kneeling.

He knelt beside her. "Meditate, eh? So…we just kneel here and think?"

"No thinking," she said, spreading her hands to the sides and tipping her head toward the sky. "Meditation is the opposite of thinking."

"Uh…I can force myself to be calm. Will that work?"

She glanced at him, and he seemed genuinely confused. Did…she really have to explain something so simple?

"It is more than calmness," she clarified. "It is an utter rejection of all emotion, sensation, and individuality. You often start by fixating on something rhythmic, like your breathing or the deliberate stretching and relaxing of a muscle. Some find it helpful to vocalize a tone or a mantra. The goal is to empty your mind of all thought—abandoning even the initial focus that started the meditation."

"What's the point of that?"

She cocked her head, baffled. "To center yourself in the cosmere," she said. "To wash your mind as you wash your body. To expel emotional refuse, as your body does with physical excrement. To be clean, down to your soul, and to renew. You've never done it before?"

He shook his head.

No *wonder* he was so…well, him. How backward must his society be to know nothing about a need so fundamental?

She started him out—as you might with a child—with a focus on breathing. She centered herself, let herself simply exist. The familiar sense of drifting enveloped her, followed by the sensation of… nothing.

Complete emptiness. Being. Nothing else. She was as the rocks, the trees in the air. The…

He was there next to her.

She could *feel* him. Now that she was centered, she sensed him *pulling* on her. She cracked an eye; his own eyes were closed, but he was smiling, his mouth twitching.

"You're thinking about something," she said to him.

"I can't help *thinking*," he complained. "I don't want to stop, regardless. I like thinking about things."

"You will control even those enjoyable thoughts better," she said, "when you are experienced at meditation."

"There's more to life than control."

"Try it," she said, centering herself again. "Practice. You'll see. The best artists can focus far better on their art after training to meditate. Control leads to focus and focus to accomplishment."

"Depends on what you want to accomplish."

The two continued to kneel, and now *Yumi* found it difficult to stop thinking. About him. Not that there was anything specifically appealing about Painter. It was just that she'd never imagined kneeling in a shrine beside someone. It was…a thing that married couples did.

Not an experience for her. To marry would be to defy the spirits and the gift they'd granted. To have a love, to have a family, would be to turn her back on her duty. She was a precious resource, and *absolute* dedication was required.

Yet strangely, many of her world's favorite stories involved a yoki-hijo falling in love. Liyun had rightly tried to keep them from her, but Yumi had heard the tales from Samjae—a yoki-hijo she'd been friends with when they were young—who had relayed them with a gleeful air of transgression.

Samjae said transgressive stories were the best. Because forbidden love somehow tasted the sweetest.

"Nice," Painter said, shaking the shrine as he stood up. Yumi started, thinking he'd somehow sensed her thoughts. But he was referencing Liyun approaching up the path. "This means we're done, right?"

"Right," Yumi said, standing. "Let's go summon the spirits."

He nodded and took a step forward. Then he paused. "Wait. I can't believe I've never asked this, but *how* do we summon them? You said something about art the other day?"

"Yes, it's easy," she said. "All you have to do is stack some rocks."

IT WAS TIME to test Yumi's theory.

She considered it as Painter entered the place of ritual, the fenced-off section of ground where stones had been placed for him. Townspeople gathered along the fence, musicians at the ready, and Yumi remained behind with them—until Painter was distant enough that she was pulled, against her will, a few steps inside.

He looked back at her, noticing the pull. She nodded to him encouragingly. Earlier she'd said that his task would be easy. That was *sort of* an untruth. Learning to properly stack rocks was difficult,

and had been a large part of her training.

But she had a suspicion that it would be easy for *him*. That was the realization she'd come to while bathing, and it would explain so much. The spirits had come to her begging for help—yet Yumi had not been enough. She wasn't skilled enough; wasn't good enough. She was inadequate.

So they had sent someone who could do what she couldn't. Painter might not be a hero…but he might be a *prodigy*. That would explain why they'd picked him. She was now confident that he'd prove to be a natural at stacking, blessed with talent beyond her own even though he'd never known it on his world. The answer was so obvious it made her smile.

She was able to maintain this happy delusion right up to the moment he "stacked" his first rock. It fell.

The very *first* rock he placed fell. Somehow he managed to fail at balancing a large flat piece of stone on the *ground*. It toppled to the side and rolled away.

The townspeople behind Yumi gasped. Painter didn't notice—just gave a goofy smile and piled up some other rocks like he was…pushing blocks into a heap. He didn't even manage this without squishing his finger, which made him yelp and shake it.

Yumi glanced to Liyun, who watched with a slack jaw, horrified.

Painter put a rock on top of his pile, which collapsed. Then he looked to Yumi and gestured. "Like this?" he asked. "How's it look?"

Oh no, Yumi thought. *Oh, spirits. No.*

They were in serious, *serious* trouble.

Chapter 14

PAINTER WOKE IN his rooms back in his world, the indignity of the rock fiasco fresh in his mind.

He still didn't understand what he'd done wrong.

No, wait.

He didn't understand what would have been *right*. Rocks? What had been the point of those rocks?

Yumi sat up from the blanket on the floor, her hair a twisted mess. "Ow," she said softly. "I think I…somehow slept on my nose…" She focused on him, and despite the frizzy hair and rumpled pajamas, she became more commanding. "You have failed."

"I stacked the rocks!" he said, sitting up. "I did it six different ways before you had me leave."

As the people watching had grown increasingly distraught, Yumi had told him to plead fatigue to Liyun. The dignified woman, plainly troubled by whatever it was he'd done wrong, had led him back to the wagon, where he'd succumbed to sleep. He probably hadn't even been awake six hours. Something about this transfer seemed to require a lot of energy, and they tired far faster than normal.

"The stacking," Yumi said, standing up and putting her hands on her hips, "must be done with *skill* and *artistry*."

"Stacking," he said, "does not require artistry."

"To do it ritually does."

"Ritually. Of course. I should have known!"

She stalked over and pointed at his face as if threatening to touch him. But he lay down on his futon and shrugged. "Go ahead. I'm feeling a bit of a chill anyway. Might warm me up."

She set her jaw, then stalked away, arms folded. She appeared to be shivering. The apartment looked as they'd left it, but he had a suspicion that they'd lost another day. Which meant the foreman

would be furious.

Hopefully the foreman had dealt with the stable nightmare. Painter hadn't warned him about the family who might need money to relocate. The foreman would put it together, right?

Maybe he should check in anyway. Make certain the Dreamwatch had arrived and everything was under control. It wasn't his problem, now that he'd reported it, but he kept remembering that little boy with blood on his cheek from the nightmare's claws. He at least wanted an update.

How, though? He didn't have a phone—those required expensive dedicated hion lines and were beyond a mere nightmare painter's wages. So to get information from the foreman, they'd have to find a public phone and wait in line, or—since the office was so close—simply walk over. Both would require them to leave the apartment, however.

Yumi was talking again. "To properly stack, one needs years of training."

"And you just expected me to do it with none?"

"I…hoped you would have natural talent," she admitted. "I was wrong, obviously. The only solution remaining is a difficult one. We *must* contact the spirits, which means you're going to have to learn. We'll come up with some excuse to Liyun, then train you, like I was as a child. Until you're good enough to draw spirits."

Delightful. Training under her sounded about as much fun as a hornet-eating competition. And these spirits? Were they even real? Everyone on her world seemed to think so, and she *had* shown him some kind of goblinlike statues underneath her wagon that made it float. Those came from somewhere.

Regardless, he had his own troubles. "I want to go talk to the foreman," he said. "And check in. Make sure I still have a job…"

"No," she said. "We're going to stay in here and I'm going to start training you. Your education begins now."

"My education? My training? To do what? Stack?" He sat up and waved his hand through the table. "Wow. That's going to be *so* effective, Yumi."

"I can demonstrate," she said. "Instruct."

"No," he said, standing. "This is my world. I should get to make the rules. There's a dangerous nightmare out there, and I want to be certain it's been dealt with. Foreman doesn't always…think the most highly of me—"

"I wonder why."

"Yumi," he said. "That nightmare is dangerous. It could be fully stable by now, and violently murderous! It could kill dozens or more if not stopped, and no regular painter is equipped to deal with one so strong. It requires talent beyond what someone like me has.

"We are going to go make sure the foreman understood my warning, then get him to check on a family I helped. Who knows—maybe those spirits sent *you* to *me*, not the other way around! Maybe they need *you* to do something here! You ever consider that?"

She huffed, arms still folded, but then glanced away. "Fine," she said softly. "But…I can't go out like this. I look, and feel, grimy. I don't think bathing when I'm a spirit cleans this body."

"Well, we can fix that," he said, walking across his living room to the small bathroom. He waved to it, and she sullenly stepped over and pulled open the door. He showed her the knobs on the shower, which she turned. Then she yelped, her eyes wide as the water sprayed down.

"You have a geyser," she said. "But…the water seems cold?"

"It will warm," he said. "Unless Mrs. Shinja used it all up again—avoid showering at nine in the morning, unless you like to freeze. Also, warning, she gets very possessive over the water. Be careful

not to use too much yourself."

"Shower," she said softly, letting the water run over her hand.

"Soap here," he said, pointing. "Shampoo and conditioner here. Clean towel there." He nodded to her, then stepped toward the door.

"Wait," Yumi said, then turned, looking at him.

"What?"

"I'm…supposed to do it myself?" she asked. "You don't have any…attendants I can call?"

"Uh, no. Not a thing in my world."

"Right," she said, and appeared strangely daunted. How could you be intimidated by something like *showering*? He smiled, finding it cathartic to see her, the tyrant, suddenly terrified of something so trivial. It was like finding out that a fearsome tiger was scared of getting its nails done.

He shut the door, but then—because he couldn't get too far from her—leaned against it. He did so absently, but then was shocked to discover he didn't fall straight through. Just like he didn't fall through the floor. So…why did he sometimes pass through things, but not always?

(I could have explained. Unfortunately, at that moment I was being used to hold a large overstuffed coat, three bags, a puppy in a carrying case, and *three* boiled eggs. Don't ask.)

The sound of the water grew louder in the bathroom, then the telltale noise of splashing followed as Yumi stepped in. A few moments later, Painter was pretty sure he heard her sigh in satisfaction.

"Nice, eh?" he said.

"It's warm," Yumi's voice said, echoing in the small bathroom. "I'd begun to think you people had no idea what it was to feel properly warm." She paused. "Um…what is shampoo?"

"For your hair," he said. "Lather it up in your hair to clean it. Then use the conditioner to…uh… It's good for the hair somehow. Trust me. It, um, moisturizes?"

"Right. I'll…shampoo, then? Do I do it now? Or after I've used the soap? And to what count do I lather before rinsing?"

"There aren't rules, Yumi," he said. "You've *really* never done this before on your own? What about when you were a kid?"

"I told you I was chosen by the spirits as a baby," she replied. "Taken from my parents, raised by the wardens to my singular purpose."

"That's terrible," he said (lowly). "You didn't get a childhood at all?"

"A yoki-hijo is not a child," she said, her voice bearing the air of an oft-recited line. "Nor is she an adult. The yoki-hijo is a manifestation of the will of the spirits. Her entire existence is service."

No wonder she was so strange. Didn't excuse her being the human manifestation of what it felt like to miss the last bus home, but—considering all of this—at least she made more sense to him now.

"How is it," she asked, her voice echoing, "that your people have captured this geyser and channeled it to your will?"

"It's not a geyser. It's water pumped from the lake, filtered and heated."

"Pumped? Are there people working those pumps right now to deliver this?"

"No, it's machines powered by the hion lines," he said. "The heating too. Touch opposite hion lines to metal and it will heat up. It's basic science to turn that into a bus engine or a simple heater."

"How do you know all this?"

"School," he said.

"You are a painter."

"School teaches more than just painting."

"I was not taught anything but my duties," she said, her voice softer. "It is better that way. I must

keep focus. Other things might…cloud my mind with frivolities."

The conversation died off, and he let her linger in the shower—longer than he'd have let himself. Eventually Yumi stopped on her own. A few minutes later she said, "Do I put these clothes back on?"

"Please don't," he said. "They haven't been washed in days. Put on a towel for now."

She stepped out a moment later, wrapped in *three* towels. Well, fair enough. Painter led her to his pile of clean clothing. "I didn't get around to folding these."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"I intended to," he said. "I usually fold everything right after it's washed."

"I'm sure," she said, nudging the pile with her toe. "This is all going to be too big on me, isn't it?"

"Yumi, in your world, you wear a dress that's roughly the size of a bedspread. I think you'll be fine."

She put a hand to her towels, then paused. But he was already walking to the bathroom, which was close enough that he didn't hit the end of his leash. He stepped inside, giving her privacy.

"Thank you," she said from outside. "For being so…thoughtful."

"This isn't being thoughtful," he said. "It's basic decency."

"Still, I didn't expect it."

"It's almost like it's unfair to judge a person based on how they react after being forced into someone else's body, towed off to a strange location, then forcibly stripped. Eh?"

"I guess," she said, "we've both been under…unusual amounts of stress." A few minutes later she continued. "All right. I don't like it, but this will have to do."

Painter stepped out to find her wearing…

Well, it certainly met the definition of an outfit. It was *clothing*, at least. Worn on a body. She'd found one of his longer shirts—a thick turtleneck—and had put that on. He wasn't too surprised by that, but she'd put a sweatshirt on *over* that, and the combination of long turtleneck and shorter sweatshirt was comical. In fact, the sweatshirt puffed out a little, as if she had another smaller one on underneath *it*. How many layers was she wearing?

Regardless, it was the sweater she was using as a *skirt*—the sleeves tucked into the waist—that really threw him for a loop. She had put on some trousers underneath that as well, which was good he supposed. But…

Wow. The total effect was truly something.

"Do women *actually* go out like this?" she asked him. "Among your people? Wearing trousers?"

"Not exactly like this…" he said. "Um, you realize that's…a shirt, not a skirt."

"I needed to improvise," she said. "To keep up *some* semblance of modesty." She lifted up one foot. "At least your sandals fit, so long as I put on three pairs of socks. But I didn't see any clogs."

"You won't need clogs here…" he said, then trailed off, trying to find something else to say. How could her clothing look so baggy, yet so overstuffed at the same time? It was swallowing her completely, like her head was peeking out the mouth of some bizarre fish made of cloth.

She stepped over to the mirror on the door of the bathroom and seemed to deflate a little at the sight. Well, after how much he'd been through in her world, it was hard to feel sorry for her. Maybe this would help her build a little empathy.

"You aren't too hot in that?" he asked.

"Your world is unnaturally cold," she said. "I think it's best to be prepared. I'm ready to go petition your foreman. Please lead the way."

He had to show her how to lock the door after herself—apparently that was another thing she didn't understand. "People would come in?" she said, turning the key. "To your home? When you're not

there? Why? To wait for you?"

He shook his head and led her down the steps to the ground floor. Here, she froze at the exit to the building, looking up at the dark sky.

I don't blame her. There was something inherently moody about Painter's world.

In Kilahito it always felt like you'd stepped out right after it finished raining. In Kilahito the streets perpetually felt too empty—but in a way that made you think you were encountering a brief lull, with activity echoing from the next street over. In Kilahito, it always felt like the lights were turned down low to let the land sleep.

In Kilahito you noticed absences. It was a city made from negative space.

"Come on," Painter said, waving to her from the street.

She stayed in the doorway. "It's so…empty."

"Comfortingly so," he said. "You *really* find this more unnerving than your world, with that big ball of fire in the sky? With all those things flying around up there? *That's* unnerving. It makes me feel like I'm going to get crushed!"

"At least we can see what's above," she said. "Here…there's just nothing."

"That's the shroud," he said. "Scientists have flown beyond it; they found more stars and things up there." He softened his tone. "Look there. See that? The one that shines through the shroud?"

She hesitantly stepped out onto the street with him and gazed up at the star. "Do you think that's *actually* my world?"

"It must be," he said. "Whatever grabbed me came from the sky, and scientists say there are people there. It's a planet like ours—they've taken pictures of what look like small cities, but they're vague, too far away to make out much. Whoever lives there doesn't seem to have radios or anything. They're…not as advanced as we are."

She didn't take this as an insult, instead staring up at the star, then turning her eyes to follow the hion lines above the street, their light painting it the contrasting blue and violet of progress.

"This stable nightmare," she said. "You said it will…hurt people? Unless we do something to stop it?"

"Yes," he said. "But *we* don't have to do anything to stop it. My job is to report it. We did that, but I forgot to warn the foreman about a family that the nightmare threatened. I need to see they've gotten the assistance I promised them."

"You mentioned that others would come to stop the nightmare," she said. "Didn't you say we could recruit them? *Actual* heroes?"

The words felt like a punch to Painter's gut, but she apparently didn't realize that, so he controlled it. "The foreman will send for a member of the Dreamwatch. Maybe two, with their companions. They're spectacular artists, but I don't think they can help with your problems. Come on."

She took a deep breath and nodded, then caught up to him. It was early evening, according to the clock in the bank window, and a decent number of people were out. Main thoroughfares like this were wide enough for an emergency vehicle to drive through, but the idea of personal vehicles would have been baffling to the residents of Kilahito. Most people traveled by bus or trolley, which connected to the hion lines and used them for power and guidance.

"The foreman's office is nearby," he said as they walked, "so fortunately we won't need to take the hion trams. The idea of talking you through the daytime tram schedule does *not* appeal to me."

She nodded again, although he doubted she knew what he was talking about. She seemed to be trying very hard not to look at the sky and was instead watching everyone they passed. She drew more than a few stares.

It's often said that nothing fazes people in a big city, and that *does* tend to be true—to an extent. Big-city people tend to be unfazed by *ordinary* sorts of strangeness. You don't give a second glance to the drunk wearing no pants since, well, that's the third one this week. But an oddity like Yumi? No pants was somehow less strange than what she'd opted to wear.

"They know what I am," she whispered to Painter. "They can sense the girl of commanding primal spirits."

"Uh…no," he said. "We don't have those here. They just think you look strange."

"They know," she said, firm. "They stare at me like the townspeople do. Even if you don't have yoki-hijo, these people can *feel* something is different about me. It is my burden. And my blessing."

Being weird was apparently her primary burden, though he wasn't certain what was blessed about it. As they passed a shop selling many varieties of hion viewers, with actors moving across the windows in unison, she paused.

"I thought yoki-hijo didn't gawk," he noted.

"Oh, sorry," she said softly, glancing down. "You are correct. I have shamed myself."

Painter grimaced. He'd been hoping for a more satisfying reaction. Giving someone a jibe, then having them *internalize* it, felt awful: the conversational equivalent of going for a comedic burp and accidentally inducing yourself to vomit.

Regardless, he navigated her without incident to the foreman's office—a small room with its own entrance at the corner of the general Painter Department headquarters. At his prompting, she entered. Foreman Sukishi didn't care about knocking.

Fortunately, he was in. The older man sat at his usual place behind the small room's single desk, feet up, reading his paper. Behind him, the many slots where he stored the paintings turned in for the day—tagged and sorted—were mostly empty. Ready for the night's offerings.

As Yumi entered he lowered his feet and folded his paper, frowning at her. "You look familiar."

"You met me the other day," she said softly, "at Painter's house. Um…Nikaro, the painter? I'm his sister."

The foreman blinked, then recognition hit him and he sat back. "Sister? Of course. That makes *so* much more sense."

Painter winced. Why did people keep saying that?

"He didn't work last night either," the foreman said. "Is that why you're here?"

"He's sick," Yumi said.

"Yeah. So sick that when I saw you the other day, he wasn't sleeping on his futon—but was out somewhere. And had to leave his sister to cover for him."

Yumi blushed, lowering her eyes. "I apologize for him, honored Foreman-nimi."

"Oh, it's not your fault," the foreman said, softening his tone. Which was horribly unfair. This man had always treated Painter with some shade of contempt—but Yumi, the tyrant? *She* got his sympathies?

Then again, she *did* seem to be an expert at milking these kinds of situations. Today she knelt down on the ground and gave the foreman a full ritual bow.

"Honored Foreman-nimi," she said, her eyes toward the floor, "I am here to ask for information. You said my brother was out doing something the other day, but I remind you: He encountered something he called a *stable nightmare*. He was watching out for that. He sent me to ask if perhaps you have an update?"

The foreman leaned forward, eyeing her. He tapped his fingers on the tabletop. "Right," he said. "Stable nightmare."

"He did send for the Dreamwatch, didn't he?" Painter asked, feeling a spike of alarm.

"Did you send for the Dreamwatch, Foreman-nimi?" Yumi asked, looking up. "Have they found the thing? Painter says that it could grow dangerous in a matter of days if not dealt with."

The foreman leaned backward in his seat, which gave a plaintive creak. "Tell me more about this thing he supposedly saw. Nikaro. Was he wounded, facing a stable nightmare?"

"No," Painter snapped. "I fought it off, thank you very much."

"He used his powers," she said, "to drive it away."

The foreman squinted his eyes. "Nikaro. Used those half-rate paintings of his to drive away a *stable nightmare*?"

"That's what he said." Yumi looked to Painter, who nodded firmly.

The foreman studied her, then sighed. "I should have expected this…"

Painter frowned. Expected? A stable nightmare?

"Nikaro always likes to be so dramatic," the foreman said softly—as if more to himself than to Yumi. "Always needs to be at the center of everything. And we know how much he likes a good lie… Doing his job never has been good enough for that one. Needs people paying attention to him, telling him how great he is."

Painter stepped back, his stomach turning over. He'd long known what the foreman thought of him, but hearing it still hurt.

"Foreman-nimi?" Yumi asked. "There was a family. They saw it, and Painter wants to check on them. He promised them financial help? He gave me an address…" She stood and wrote it quickly, able to write in his language as he was able to write in hers.

The foreman grunted and read the address. This finally seemed to give him pause. But then he tucked it away in his pocket and shook his head. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you," she said, bowing again. "Thank you *so* much."

She left, holding the door long enough for Painter to slink out behind her.

"There," she said, halting at the curb. "We handled *that*."

"Except we didn't," Painter said. "He didn't believe you."

"What? He said—"

"He said what he needed to," Painter explained, "to get you out the door. But he thinks I made up the story about the stable nightmare in order to get attention. That (lowly) man!"

Yumi appeared to shrink farther into her oversized clothing. "So he's not going to stop the creature?"

"Doubt it," Painter said. "If we're lucky, he'll check on the address. But it's been three days—and I told the family to get out of town. They'll likely have found a way, even without the money I promised them."

"He might look into it," Yumi said. "Maybe he'll find them and see evidence of the nightmare?"

"Maybe," Painter said, sighing. "Hopefully. Unless he decides to 'take care' of things by writing me up."

"Your world makes no sense," Yumi said. "People simply…mislead one another?"

"I'll bet they do the same on your world," Painter said. "Just not around you. People are people, Yumi. Your world is different, yes, but I doubt it's *that* different."

She started toward his flat again, and he gave minimal guidance as he walked beside her, fuming. And, deeper inside, feeling utterly humiliated. Based on the foreman's expression and attitude, the man wasn't going to investigate at all.

That nightmare had been crafty, powerful. Painter had given it a fright, so it might stay away a few

days. But it *would* be back.

"What if you're right?" Yumi said as they walked. "What if the spirits sent me here to help you with this nightmare? What do we do?"

"I'm thinking about it, okay?" Painter snapped.

By the time they neared the apartment building though, he still didn't have any good answers. Maybe…the nightmare would get noticed by someone else? But if it had gone this long without being captured, then it must be distinctly cunning. It would probably only draw attention once it started killing…

"Hey!" a voice said. "It's you!"

Painter and Yumi stopped on the street by the apartment building as Akane came out the front door. Gorgeous as always, she was wearing street clothing again—skirt, blouse, makeup—rather than her work gear. She went out most evenings before their shift began, clubbing, or…other normal-person things?

He didn't really know, to be honest. Perhaps this was what she wore to go to the grocery store.

"Yumi, was it?" Akane said, looking her up and down, lingering on the sweater-turned-skirt.

"Yes," Yumi said. "Um…I lost my trunk of clothing on the way here. I had to borrow my brother's things."

"Good save," Painter said. "Get rid of her. We need to get back to the flat and discuss what to do."

"I haven't seen Nikaro around," Akane said. "What's up with him? He hasn't been reporting to his shift."

"Oh!" Yumi said. "He has…um…some big project he's been doing. Somewhere else."

"Your brother," Akane said flatly, "invited you to the city, then *left* you *alone*. *After* you'd lost your luggage?"

"Yes?" Yumi said, shrinking down in her—his—clothing.

Painter groaned as he saw his chances with Akane fading even further. (Which proved him to be an optimist, since he assumed he'd ever had chances in the first place.)

"Quick!" he said. "Let's go."

"Thank you and excuse me," Yumi said, with a quick bow, then slipped past Akane into the building.

Akane lingered, holding the door. Before Yumi and Painter could reach the stairs, she rushed in after them and caught up to Yumi.

"Hey," Akane said, "this is probably none of my business, so tell me to go stick my head in the shroud if you want. But…are you all right, Yumi? Could you maybe use some help? Someone to take you shopping for some new clothes?"

Painter sighed. Akane was always—

Yumi, shockingly, *burst into tears*. "Yes," she said between sobs. "Oh, yes, *please*."

Chapter 15

YUMI, OF COURSE, instantly felt mortified at her breakdown. She tried to control her tears as she took Akane by the hand and bowed to her in thanks.

Surprisingly, it wasn't against the rules for a yoki-hijo to cry. Many of these rules had been instituted by older yoki-hijo themselves, after all—and so they'd made crying *in front of others* the thing that was against protocol.

I find it telling. They all understood. For one living the life of a yoki-hijo, breakdowns were basically inevitable. You just had to hide them as best you could.

Regardless, Yumi knew she shouldn't act this way. It was just such a *relief* to have someone pay attention to her needs. Akane's attempt to help, albeit in a small way, was physically overwhelming.

This place was just so *strange*. That sky felt like it would swallow her, but that was somehow the least of it. She'd seen enormous vehicles—carrying tons of people—moving through the nearby streets. These buildings towered around her, stacks of stones piled so straight, glued together. They could have been mountains. And then there were those twin lines of light glowing and hovering in the air above every street, connected to every building, forming garish glowing signs.

She'd been dumped into all of this without any direction. She felt lost, even when she knew where she was. She felt terrified even though she wasn't in danger. Worst, she'd had to go out wearing… wearing this *mess*.

Akane patted her hand as if troubled. Nearby, Painter stared at her, frowning. He seemed baffled. Well, Yumi understood both of their emotions.

"Right, then," Akane said, towing Yumi out the door. "I know a place." Her shoes made a sharp clopping sound on the strange black-stone street. It didn't sound like a pair of clogs, but it was

comforting nonetheless.

Yumi seized her emotions in a death grip and wrangled them under control. As soon as her tears stopped, however, she found she was still humiliated—not merely because of her outburst, but because of what had happened the last time she'd met this woman.

"Akane," she said. "Last time we spoke…I embarrassed myself by exposing, flagrantly, my ignorance. Please accept not just my apologies, but my sincere remunerations—anything I can do in your favor, I will extend."

"It's not your fault your brother is a creep, Yumi."

"He's not a creep!" Yumi said quickly. Then paused. Was that a lie? She wasn't completely certain. "In truth, I misunderstood what he was saying. He was speaking of…of the dramas he likes to watch. Not of anyone he knows. In addition, I was overwhelmed. People in the city are…different from the way people are back home."

"I've heard about the smaller towns," Akane said with a laugh. "I know things are more traditional there. We must look a sight to you!"

"It's more the city itself," Yumi said, staring to the right as they crossed a road. "The streets seem to go on *forever*. So many people all in one place, building monoliths toward a dark sky. Living atop one another, piled like stones in a wall…"

Akane smiled.

"Did I say something wrong?" Yumi asked, lowering her eyes. "I gravely apologize for my foolishness."

"You're not foolish," Akane said. "Actually, I was thinking that I like the way you talk. It has a kind of…poetic feel to it."

Poetic? She was merely speaking with proper formality. Still, it would not be polite to correct Akane, so she held her tongue. Akane led her to a large structure with bigger windows and brighter lights than many. Yumi glanced over her shoulder toward Painter, who was following along behind, hands in his pockets. He didn't seem to want to talk, but she made sure to linger at the door so he could follow her.

Then all her attention was captured by the place inside those doors: a vast open room full of displays and statues wearing clothing. Hundreds of skirts hanging in artfully arranged racks. Shirts piled high in cubbies on the walls. Shoes in a thousand different varieties, raised up on tables to show them off.

"So," Akane said, "you'll need at least a couple of outfits. Three, maybe? That could keep you going until you can send for something from home."

Yumi simply stared. Bright lights presented it all, of a whiter light than the lines outside. Dozens of people moved among the racks, chatting, pointing at different options. Was this…this *all* just here for people to *take*?

"What do you like to wear?" Akane said gently, nudging her. "Yumi?"

"I…" she whispered. "There's so much…"

"Their selection," Akane said, "is *acceptable*." She leaned in. "Shinzua Shopping Center has more cutting-edge trends, but the prices there are *insane*. This place is a good balance."

Prices.

Right, *money*. Normal people needed *money* to buy things.

Yumi panicked. "I have misled you, honored Akane! I don't possess any money for—"

"It's fine," she said. "I'll cover it and charge your brother. Trust me. He'll pay me back. I'll make *sure* of it."

Oh. Well, she supposed that he owed her that much. She pointedly didn't look toward him as she nodded.

"So, three outfits?" Akane said. "One skirt, two pairs of pants, some shirts?"

"No!" Yumi said, too forcefully. "Um, dresses? Full dresses? Is that acceptable?" Maybe she could find something similar to what she'd worn at home. Even though…she had yet to see a single woman wearing anything of the sort.

"Sure," Akane said. "This way."

They wove between racks of clothing, and the garments all appeared so…slight. Shirts that fit tightly on the torso, skirts so light and flowing they seemed made of air and clouds. She and Akane emerged into a section selling dresses, and Yumi's feeling of intimidation built. How did anyone choose? She had always worn what she'd been dressed in—never voicing an opinion. Because why would she need one of those?

She was about to tell Akane to find her the thickest, bulkiest dress—when she froze. Just ahead, a statue of a woman with no face stood on a pedestal, wearing something *gorgeous*. Flowing, but not insubstantial, the light blue dress deepened to a darker color near the floor—like it was the blossom of a flower. It did outline the form, as all of the dresses in this place did, but didn't *hug* it like the skirts that Akane favored. Instead it had a fluid, rippling sense to it.

To wear something like that… It would flare when she turned. It would leave her shoulders mostly bare, save for two straps, though the neckline wasn't nearly as daring as the other dresses'. It would show more of her than she had ever exposed.

But it was like the gown a *queen* would wear. A queen from a story. A woman, not a girl of commanding primal spirits.

"Ah," Akane said, stepping back to join her. "*Someone* has *remarkably* good taste. What's your size? I'll go get one off the racks."

"No!" Yumi said, taking her by the arm. "I can't, honored Akane. It's too…daring."

Akane glanced toward the dress, then back at Yumi, who blushed. (Perhaps Akane was thinking that wearing a sweater as a skirt was the actual daring maneuver.)

"Look," Akane said, patting her hand. "I won't force you to do anything you're uncomfortable with. But you're in the city now, Yumi. There's no better time to try out something new—be a little *daring*, so to speak. It might not seem so to you, but that dress is actually pretty conservative here."

Yumi refrained from eyeing Akane's own skirt, which appeared about one yawn-and-stretch away from flipping up and turning into a belt instead. Perhaps…the other one *was* conservative. And the spirits hadn't punished her for the lies she'd been forced to tell…so maybe they *knew* she'd have to do things differently here. To accomplish their designs?

That was her excuse, at least. In truth, looking up at that dress—and realizing she could simply *choose* to wear it—awakened something in her. This inclination hadn't been sleeping deeply, hadn't been hidden far underneath the surface. It had been lurking, even back in her world. Liyun would have called it dangerous.

Liyun wasn't here.

"Let's try it," Yumi whispered, clinging to Akane.

"Great! What's your size?"

Yumi felt herself blushing. "I…don't know. I've never been shopping before."

"*What?*"

"I just always wore what was given to me."

"Siblings?" she said (lowly). "You're the youngest then? That's rough, always wearing hand-me-

downs. I know how it feels. So this is your first time?"

Yumi nodded.

"No wonder you look like a moth in a light bulb factory," Akane said. "How about this: you point out a few other mannequins with a style you like, and I'll gather together a selection of similar things, then bring them to your changing room to try on. That way you don't have to pick from hundreds of options, only a dozen or so."

"That sounds wonderful," Yumi said (highly). "Thank you, Akane. You are an honor to your family, your lineage, and the spirits themselves."

"And you," Akane said, "are an *absolute* charm bracelet of a person."

Akane led her to a servant who worked at the place, and there they took some very personal measurements of Yumi. Akane seemed to think this would embarrass her, but standing there and being prodded was the first thing Yumi found *familiar* about this entire experience. Despite not being particularly fond of doing it in front of Painter.

"Don't suppose you know your bra size?" Akane asked after that part was done.

"Uh…" Would saying she didn't know what that was make her seem too odd? She didn't want to act *too* strange, lest people realize she was literally an alien. "No?"

The next measurements were even more personal. But Yumi suffered it, and soon found herself deposited in a small hallway with a set of rooms apparently for trying on clothing. Painter sat outside as she stepped into one, though she didn't have any clothing to try on yet—Akane was still gathering it.

"What," Yumi hissed at Painter through the open door, "is a 'bra'?"

"Undergarment," he said. "For women." He hesitated, then gestured toward his chest.

"Oh," she said. "Why not a bosom band?"

"That…might be a better question for Akane than me."

"I suppose," she said, "that you find all of this a frivolous distraction."

He shrugged, looking out toward where Akane passed by, now leading *two* different shop servants. "You need clothes, Yumi. And I don't know anyone better to help you get them than Akane."

"She's very pretty," Yumi said.

"Prettiest in our class at school," he agreed.

"Tell me what you like about her, *other* than the fact that she's pretty."

He paused, and took an embarrassing—for him—amount of time to reply. "She has great fashion sense."

"That's basically another way of saying she's pretty."

"Why do you care?" he snapped.

"Well, *I've* already noticed that she's a tender and helpful person," Yumi said. "I was simply curious if that is why you're so infatuated with her."

"I'm not infatuated," Painter said, and sounded serious, not defensive. "I just have a lot of time to think. Maybe too much time to think. And dream." He shook his head as Akane passed back the other way, the two servants laden with clothing, and…was that a *third* hurrying along after them?

Hadn't she said she was only going to get a *few* outfits for Yumi to try on?

"She was nice to me," Painter finally said. "Even though I was from a small town. When we first met in class three years ago, a few of the others made fun of me. Akane instead asked what made me want to be a painter…"

When he didn't continue, Yumi asked, "You had a choice?" It sounded stupid when she said it. It seemed obvious in retrospect that he'd chosen to become a painter. Yet few people in Torio actually

got to decide what they did. You generally just inherited your family's trade. Unless you were a yoki-hijo.

"It's how we do things here," he said.

"And you became a painter of nightmares?" she said. "Why?"

Before he could answer, Akane came striding back—four servants in tow, all laden with clothing. Yumi was accepting the first armload, listening to Akane's instructions, before she realized that Painter could have simply answered her. No one could hear him but her, so why fall silent when others were near?

Soon Yumi was closed in her little room, surrounded by too many options. She began by peeling off the layers she'd chosen to wear, finding her skin sweaty underneath. She hadn't really been paying attention, but it felt nice to be out of that clothing—it had actually been *too* warm. Perhaps she was adjusting to this semifrozen land.

The first undergarment made sense, but the bra…well, that was formidable. She could see how it was to be worn, but there were straps and a clip and…well, it took some work. She did pause while putting it on, marveling at the stretchiness of some of the cloth. How did they make it do *that*?

She got the thing on finally, though she had to put it on backward to get the clip fastened, then twist it around and fit herself into it. It felt kind of constrictive, and it outlined her form instead of flattening it as was normal. She supposed that was how Akane and the others made their figures look so… prominent. Why would they want to be *more* conspicuous?

The bra seemed a purely vain thing, and she almost took it off to go without. But then she turned, and cocked her head. Then she tried jumping. And…

That felt *nice*. Not that it was *comfortable* really, but it certainly prevented *discomfort*.

"Yumi?" Akane asked from outside. "You okay?"

"This bra," she said, jumping again, "is *incredible*."

"Never had one that fits right, eh?" Akane asked. "You'd be surprised the difference it makes."

It was her intention to try on the pretty dress last, but…well, her curiosity got the better of her. She pulled it on, then looked at herself in the changing mirror. It was beautiful, like clouds above a deep blue sky—like the wind itself given shape and sent to embrace her.

But there was a magnetism to it beyond its overt beauty. It transformed her into someone else. Someone who could make a choice. It was the first time in her *entire life* that she'd made a decision just for *herself*.

Akane had brought her a small bag of toiletries, and inside was a brush. Yumi stroked her hair with this a few times, getting rid of the frazzles, then stood and stared at the mythical being in the mirror, feeling a disconnect, trying to accept that it was her.

"Well?" Akane called. "Come on! Let me see!"

Yumi blushed immediately, putting her hands to her bare shoulders. The previous layers had been too hot, but this was undoubtedly too cold. "I don't know if I can," she called out. "My shoulders are naked!"

"Ah!" Akane said. "Well, you're lucky. Because *I* thought of that. Look at the first hook on your right for the matching top."

Yumi looked and saw a short buttoning top. You might call it a dress cardigan, but it was a bit fancier than that—a little more stiff (of a denim blend) and shorter, not even reaching to her navel. It reminded Yumi a little of the top part of the tobok she wore among her people, only with shorter sleeves.

She removed it from its hanger and hesitantly pulled it on. It matched the dress nicely. The fit was

close, and she sported a *distinctly* feminine silhouette. She tried not to be embarrassed about that as she opened the door.

Akane beamed at her. That gave Yumi a surge of confidence, like a flower rising high into the sky. One of the attendants had stayed, and this woman nodded thoughtfully and seemed approving as well.

Behind the two of them, Painter stood up straight, gawking at her. He probably thought she looked silly, as he knew the type of clothing she *should* be wearing.

"That is *wonderful*," Akane said. "We're getting that one for *sure*. But here, try on the others! You *have* to see this pink one…"

Akane stepped in and dug through the dresses to find a specific choice. Yumi raised her chin and met Painter's eyes. He was still staring at her. Well, for once she didn't care if she looked improper. The spirits had demanded a lot of her these last few days.

It was blasphemous, but she had decided it was time for her to demand something in return. She wanted *possessions* for the first time in her life. So it was that an hour later, she trotted out of the store wearing the blue dress and clutching a package containing two other outfits of slightly different styles. Hers. Actually *hers*. Granted, she wouldn't be able to bring them back to her land, where her life—once this was over—would go back to the way it always was.

For now, she got to live a dream. That almost made all of this chaos worth it. And as she walked home with Akane, she noticed something else. No one was staring at her anymore.

Painter had been *right*, she realized with amazement. No one here knew what she was. No one here cared. Now that she wasn't dressed in such ridiculous clothing, now that she fit in, she was just… normal.

It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

"All right," Akane said, stopping outside the apartment building. "I need to get ready for work. The foreman throws a fit if I go painting in a miniskirt. You have food? Upstairs?"

"Um…" Yumi said. "Technically it *counts* as food."

"Uh-huh. Come back to the lobby in ten minutes. I'm meeting friends for lunch before shift at a noodle shop nearby. You'll join us."

"I'm being too much of a burden," Yumi said, lowering her head.

"You? A burden?" Akane laughed. "Please, Yumi. You're not going to deny me the chance to show off my fashion pupil to my friends, are you?"

Nearby, Painter was shaking his head urgently. That, mixed with her growling stomach, was the decider.

"Of course I'll go with you," Yumi said. "Let me go drop these things off at my brother's room."

Chapter 16

"WHAT'S A NOODLE shop?" Yumi asked, arranging her new outfits on the floor.

"Place where you can pay," Painter explained, "and people bring you food." He lingered in the doorway, watching her. It was surreal how a simple outfit change made her seem like she belonged. All of a sudden he could picture her here, in his life.

"People bring you food," she said. "You don't have to make it yourself?"

"No."

"Do they…feed you?"

Why did she sound *hopeful*? "No," he said. "You need to do that part on your own."

"Well, as long as I don't have to make it," she said, hands on her hips as she surveyed the clothing she'd laid out.

"You're just going to leave it there?" he asked.

She hesitated, then glanced at him. "Is there…another place where it should go?" She looked at the heaps of clothing.

"Closet," he said, gesturing, "has hangers and a rod."

"Oh!" She walked over. "How clever! Your people think of so many interesting things."

"I…suspect your people have closets, Yumi," he said.

She cocked her head. "I guess maybe they do. I've never been inside another person's home." She began hanging the clothes. "Is there money here somewhere I can use at the noodle shop?"

"In the can on the counter," he said. "But Yumi, I don't think you should go. So far we've been lucky. Akane hasn't asked too many questions, and hasn't noticed the oddities about you. But the longer you spend around people, the more dangerous it gets."

"Dangerous?" she said. "Getting clothing? Eating dinner?"

"Someone's bound to ask questions you can't answer," he said. "They might start poking around, getting suspicious. Eventually someone will find out I don't *have* a sister. Then things start getting awkward."

"This is why lies are bad," she said, shutting the closet doors. "We should have told them the truth at the start."

"Oh? And how did it go telling Liyun the truth? And telling the foreman about the nightmare? How well did that work?"

"These mistakes are due to our inadequacy," she said. "We should try again, presenting Liyun with the truth in a more convincing way."

"No," he said. "She'll just think we've decided to make her life terrible for some reason."

Yumi averted her eyes.

"It could be even worse here, if you tell the truth," he said. "They'll demand proof you can't provide. What if they think you're insane? Or that you've killed me?"

She looked at her feet. "I thought…maybe the other painters could help me. Figure out what I'm supposed to do. It sounded…nice to talk to them."

"That group?" Painter snorted. "They're too exclusive for people like us, Yumi. You might be a novelty to them now, but they'll drop you as soon as something more interesting comes along. Trust me."

"Akane is nice. You said she was nice to you."

"She was. At first." He turned away, not wanting to think about those times.

Yumi was quiet for a moment, then retrieved the money and brushed past him, heading toward the stairs. "I want to do it anyway."

A second later, he was yanked after her. *That* aspect of this was extremely unfair. How was it that he got bullied by her when he was physical, but then he ended up being pulled along like a dog on a leash when *she* was the one with the body?

They met Akane below, now in a simpler outfit of slacks and a blouse. Not exactly what he'd call painting gear, but it was as dressed down as she got. Akane led Yumi around the corner to the Noodle Pupil, and Painter followed sullenly. He couldn't have said what made him want to avoid this place. Perhaps it was the way that Akane had adopted Yumi so easily. Reminded him of how easily he'd been dropped.

Not that he could, in all honesty, blame them.

He felt better though when they stepped into the restaurant. The place was familiar, and even without a body he could smell the warm scents of broth and green onions. In here, the clatter of bowls and utensils felt somehow *softer* than it did in other restaurants.

Akane hung her oversized painter's bag on the arm of the statue in the front of the shop, the one that (in case you've forgotten) contained the body of an exceedingly bored storyteller. At least the eggs were gone by that point.

Painter's former friends sat at the rear, in their usual place. As he followed the two women over, he felt…annoyed. He'd wanted for so long to be invited to this table. To rejoin in this familiar laughter, as he had during school.

It turned out there was an easy way to get the others to let him back in: he just had to be invisible.

Akane presented Yumi with a flourish. "Behold," she said, "Nikaro's *little sister*."

There were three others in the group: two girls, one guy. That meant Tojin was outnumbered three to one in the clique—unless you went by sheer muscle mass. Painter was reasonably certain Tojin

outweighed the other three combined.

"No (lowly) way," Tojin said, sitting backward on his chair as he usually did, sleeves rolled up as if they were too intimidated by his massive forearms and had shriveled out of respect. He was squeezing some kind of hand exercise device, ten reps in each hand before swapping, because of course he was.

"That's Tojin," Akane said, gesturing to him.

"Hey," he replied, swapping hands.

"Tojin," Painter said, leaning in toward Yumi, "is exactly what he appears to be. The type of guy who would roll up his sleeves and do exercises at the dinner table to get a better chance at showing off to the women. He *never* misses a chance to display his body to the girls."

"This is Masaka," Akane said, gesturing toward a girl all in black, huddled in her chair with her knees up, sketchpad in front of her. Masaka hated showing skin, and wore a scarf to hide even her neck. She peeked over the top of the sketchpad with narrowed eyes, dark beneath her bangs.

Yumi stepped back in shock. Masaka had that effect on people.

"Rumors in school were," Painter whispered, "she had to become a painter as part of a plea deal with the judge after stabbing someone during her lower school years. She doesn't talk much. Too busy plotting."

Masaka punctuated something on the page at that moment, then looked up again at Yumi—who took another unconscious step backward.

"Don't let her stern demeanor get to you," Akane said with her usual cheerfulness. "She's a softy inside. Besides, staring only makes her angry. And finally, here is Izumakamo!"

A girl in trousers and a sweatshirt stood up, proffering her hand. Yumi stared at it.

"You take it," Painter explained, "and bow. It's a kind of greeting."

Yumi hesitantly did as he said, taking Izzy's hand and bowing as the other girl did likewise. Then Yumi glanced toward Painter, as if expecting an explanation of who this was, like he'd given for the other two.

"Just watch," Painter said instead.

"Yumi…" Izzy said, thoughtful. Then she dug into a thick encyclopedia-style book, flipping pages quickly. "Starts with a *Y*…two syllables… Birth year and month?"

"Say you're year of the dragon," Painter told her. "It would look strange if we're the same age. And, let's say, the month of rain. For fun."

"Um…" Yumi said. "Year of the dragon. Month of rain?"

"Ah yes…" Izzy continued, flipping a few more pages. "Oh, here it is. Guri and Shishi's wedding episode! The first wedding, I mean. You will have very good luck today, Yumi. Very good indeed. Great day for making promises."

Yumi regarded the young woman, baffled. Nearby, Tojin snickered, swapping hands again with his exercise device.

"Don't you laugh, Tojin," Izzy said. "This is a *totally* legitimate science."

"Don't worry about her, Yumi," Akane said, leaning in and whispering. "She's special."

"My talent *is* special!" Izzy declared. "You wait and see. Soon people are going to catch on, and *everyone* will be getting their dramascope. I'll be famous for inventing it, and you all won't be able to make fun of me any longer. You'll have to wait in line."

"Wait in line," Tojin said. "To make fun of you."

"No. Um…"

"Presumably," he said, flexing his hand, "because so many other people will want a chance to do

so?"

"That is *not* what I meant," Izzy said. She then leaned toward Masaka and whispered conspiratorially, "When I'm rich and famous, want to be my bodyguard?"

Masaka shrugged.

"Great," Izzy said. "Your first job will be to beat up Tojin when he tries to tell everyone he knew me before I was famous."

"I'm…confused," Yumi said.

"Not surprising," Akane said. "It's just a game Izzy plays."

"It's *not* a game," Izzy replied.

"She thinks," Akane said, "that she can predict people's fortunes using episode guides for hion-line programs."

"It's an ancient art," Izzy said.

"You made it up!" Tojin said, pointing.

"I made it up a long time ago," Izzy said. "During a previous life. So it's ancient. Do you want to see the dramascope that explains it? Here, let me show you."

She grinned as Tojin rolled his eyes. Painter never had been able to figure out how serious she was about her crazy ideas. In moments like this—smiling as if she'd gone too far on purpose—he was left uncertain.

Standing there though…listening to Tojin joke while Masaka drew and Izzy rambled on about something incredibly random…he felt a painful nostalgia. For something he'd lost, like a misplaced note you keep remembering you wrote something important on, but you can never quite recall what pocket you left it in.

These *weren't* his friends anymore. This feeling he felt? It was false. He turned to go as the food arrived, brought by one of Design's assistants. Two bowls for Tojin—no noodles, just extra eggs and pork—and a small one for Masaka.

There was nothing for Painter here. Why had he yearned so long to come back to this?

He walked off. Yumi gave him a panicked look as he did, but she was the one who had wanted to come down here and talk to this crew. She could do it without him. He wanted to be as far away as he could get—well, as far away as he could get without being yanked every time Yumi shifted. He made it to the bar, where he settled on an empty stool, facing away from the group.

Yumi joined him a few minutes later. "They said," she told him softly, "I should come up here to order? Which means…tell them what food I want, right?"

He nodded.

"Is there a specific dish I'm supposed to have?" she asked.

"You pick any you want," he said.

She drew in a breath, appearing nervous about that idea.

"Get a small mild pork with salt," he said. "No add-ons. My guess, from what I've been fed in your world, is that you'd like something with a more…non-complex taste."

"Thank you," she said, then held up a sheet of paper. "Um…Masaka gave me this…"

It was a picture of a rabbit drawn with deep, cavernous holes for eyes and a stare that seemed like it wanted to swallow the world. Text underneath said, "Yumi reminds me of a cute bunny."

"Oh dear," Painter said (lowly).

"What?" Yumi asked, her voice rising.

"She likes you."

"Is that bad?"

"Never can tell with Masaka," he replied.

Yumi settled down on the stool next to his. "You were right," she said softly. "I shouldn't have come here. I don't…know how to be a person, Painter."

"Well, maybe *I* was wrong. Because you need practice."

"No," she said. "I don't need practice to become something I shouldn't. I'm *not* a person, Painter."

He frowned, looking toward her. "Of course you're a person, Yumi."

"No, I'm a concept," she said. "A thing, owned by society. I would be better as a machine, like that box that shows stories in your room. If I didn't think, if I didn't feel, I'd do my job far better." She gazed downward, concentrating on the counter. "The nibbles at freedom I had today are dangerous, Painter. They taste of things I *shouldn't* want. If I let them control me, then what? I still have to go back. Take up my duties again. Do you think maybe the spirits sent me here to warn me? Or maybe… to test me?"

"No," Painter said. "I think they sent you here as a reward, Yumi. So that you *could* taste these things. Enjoy them, for once in your life."

She glanced at him, then smiled. And suddenly he felt ashamed for his earlier joy at her discomfort. Perhaps he should have seen it before, but this was a person who somehow felt more isolated than he did.

He'd thought himself alone. He'd barely understood the word.

Her smile faltered, and she averted her eyes. "I wish I could believe you were right. But the spirit that came to me, Painter…it was *hurting*. It *needed* something. This isn't a reward. It might not be a punishment or a test, but it's no reward."

"You could still enjoy it," he said. "While you can."

She glanced back at him. And instinctively, he reached his hand toward hers. She looked like she could use something to hold. But…then he stopped, because he couldn't touch her even if he wanted to. He blushed, feeling foolish.

A bowl clattered to the floor.

They both jumped, turning toward Design—who had just left the kitchen. She didn't seem to notice the bowl of soup she'd dropped; instead she stood there slack-jawed.

"Storms!" Design said, staring *directly* at Painter. "Nikaro? Are you *dead*?"

Chapter 17

IT TOOK YUMI a moment to register what had happened.

This strange woman with the white hair and the outrageously full figure was looking at Painter. She'd called him by name.

She could see him.

Someone could *see Painter*.

"Design!" he said, leaping to his feet. "You can *see* me?"

"Um…" Design said, glancing to the sides at the nearby patrons, who were staring at her because of the dropped bowl. "Nope. Nope, can't see any ghosts here. Mortals *hate* talk of ghosts." She raised her eyes and spoke louder. "Just an accident with my clumsy, inefficient meat-fingers! I did *not* see a ghost. Everyone, enjoy the noodles!"

"Design!" Painter said, pained.

Design nodded toward the ground in an exaggerated way. Then she crouched to begin cleaning up the noodles. Painter rushed around the bar, and Yumi—feeling awkward—grabbed some bar cloths and did the same, kneeling down.

This left the three of them all out of sight but perfectly audible—except maybe Painter. This method seemed *more* suspicious to Yumi. But she didn't know how normal people acted, so maybe she wasn't the best judge.

"Painter!" Design said. "How did you die? Did you choke on an overly large noodle?"

"I don't think I'm dead," he said, whispering for some reason. "A couple days ago, I started waking up on *her* world! I think it's the star—like, I think I'm visiting it. Then when I fall asleep, I wake up back here—but I'm like a ghost, and somehow she's here now."

Design looked at Yumi, then stuck out her hand. “Hello! Would you like to shake meat-appendages?”

“Uh…” Yumi took the hand, then bowed. Strangely, Design didn’t bow back, but only waggled her hand a little.

“Nice to meet you,” Design said. “You’re not a ghost.”

“We haven’t been able to figure out what’s going on,” Painter said. “Or why I wear her body when I’m in her world, but she doesn’t wear mine when she’s here.”

“Uh, Painter?” Design said, nodding her head toward Yumi. “Yeah, that’s totally your body.”

“But…” he said. “It looks like her. Even to you, right?”

“Yup,” Design said. “But I can see the line of Connection from you to it. I’ve got this, um, strong Cognitive aspect? Hard to explain without numbers, and mortals get cross-eyed when I use those instead. I’m not *really* here, like I’ve told you, so I can see Cognitive Shadows even when they don’t want to be seen. Also, your body is a girl’s body now.”

“*What?*” Painter said.

“Who are you?” Design said, ignoring Painter and looking at Yumi. “You’ve got a *storming* strong Spiritual aspect, highly Invested in some strange way. Otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to rewrite his body with your soul and warp it to match your sense of self. Shrinking and reshaping the bones, stretching and shifting the muscles… Fun stuff.”

Painter’s face paled.

Yumi tried to take it in stride. “I…didn’t mean to do any of these things, honored hostess. It was done by the spirits because of some kind of desperate need.”

“Yeah,” Design said. “Um, that’s some seriously hard work you did. Bet you’re hungry.”

“Ravenous,” Yumi admitted. “Though not so bad today as the last time I came to your world.”

“Should get easier each time,” Design said. “The body will fight you less and waste less energy trying to snap back to looking like him. Still, I should feed you. It’s, like, my job. I’m *employed*!” She popped up from behind the bar and shooed Yumi back to a stool, though they’d barely cleaned up half the mess. Design did the rest quickly and efficiently, while Painter stood morosely nearby.

“I don’t *want* to be a girl,” he said.

“Oh hush,” Design said, quickly mopping the floor. “I’ve been pretending to be one for years now, so I’m an authority—and it’s really quite nice. Except for the sexism. But it’s hard to blame that on being a woman instead of on, you know, *morons*.” She paused, then smiled at Painter. “Don’t look so glum. Your body will probably snap back to your shape once she’s no longer attached to it.”

“Probably?” he asked.

“Definitely probably.” She handed him the mop, which slipped through his incorporeal fingers as soon as she let go of it. Which caused her to snicker. “What?” she asked at his offended expression. “Just doing some tests.”

She gathered the bucket and mop and stalked into the kitchen again. Painter rounded the bar, then slumped down next to Yumi. She, in turn, glanced around the room—but no one seemed to be paying much attention to them. Akane was gazing toward Yumi as if to check on her, so Yumi gave her what was hopefully an “I’m good” gesture.

“Why is no one bothered,” Yumi whispered, “by the things Design is saying and doing? Ghosts? Dropping a mop? Talking to the air?”

“This place is mostly full of longtimers,” Painter explained, his voice sullen. “They’re… accustomed to Design. She acts like this even on normal days.”

“I ignore social boundaries,” Design said, bustling out of the kitchen with a bowl of soup for Yumi.

“It’s endearing.”

She set the bowl down and leaned forward. People on this planet…really liked their low-cut tops, didn't they?

"Eat," Design said, pointing.

Yumi started eating. It was a stronger flavor than she was used to—in fact, it was also a *stranger* flavor than she was used to. Spices she'd never tasted mixed in her mouth, making it wake up from a long slumber. The first spoonful was a lot. The second was satisfying. The third…divine.

"Usually," Painter said, "you use the maipon sticks to eat the noodles."

Yumi glanced at the sticks, which she'd seen her attendants use to feed her. She'd never held any herself. So she stuck with the spoon.

"I still don't understand," Painter said to Design, "why you can see me."

"It's technical," Design said. "It's mostly because I'm not actually human, but an immortal essence of pure Investiture with an imitation human fleshy-type shell stapled on."

Yumi paused, her spoon trailing noodles halfway to her mouth. She tried to parse that sentence—which was difficult—but came to the obvious conclusion.

"Are you…a spirit?" she asked.

"Depends," Design said, "on what definition of the word you're using. What is a spirit to you, Yumi?"

"They're the soul of my world," Yumi explained between bites. "They rise up from the ground at my summons if I—as the intercessor between the divine and the mortal—please them with my stacks of stone, arranged to their liking. In return, they will do as I ask and take shapes of power and utility, serving for a time to bless the lives of my people."

"Stacks of stone, eh?" Design said.

"Arranged in patterns," Yumi replied. "For reasons beyond the knowledge of mortals, the spirits love to see order made from chaos. There are other ways, but stacks of stones have proven among the most attractive to the spirits."

"It's the mixing of math and art," Design said. "Plus the human aspect—the concentration, the satisfaction, the emotion. This entire region is littered with Splinters that Virtuosity left behind. Regardless, it seems that, yay, I can answer you. Yes! I'm absolutely a spirit. Basically the same thing."

Yumi had suspected, but still she found the idea daunting. She reverently put down her spoon, and after a moment of trying to decide what to do, she started one of the prayers.

"Stop that," Design said, smacking her on the head with a spoon. "I'm not an honorspren. What's wrong with you?"

"I…" Yumi said (highly), "should show you devotion."

"I'm not one of *your* spirits," Design said. "Besides, I'm on vacation. No worshipping the bits of God when they're on vacation. It's a rule I just made up."

Well, that was going to be difficult, but it *was* Yumi's duty to do as the spirits asked, so…she hesitantly picked up her spoon and continued eating. As she did though, she shot a glare at Painter.

"You had a spirit here," she said, "and you didn't *mention* it to me?"

"I didn't know she was a spirit," Painter said.

"I've told you," Design said, lounging with her elbows on the bar. "I've told basically everyone. They ignore me. If I were a more vengeful bit of God, I'd be offended. Fortunately, I'm eccentric instead. It's endearing."

"She always says strange things like that," Painter said, still addressing Yumi. "How was I to know she was being truthful rather than crazy?"

Design leaned in toward Yumi and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. “I don’t think Nikaro paid much attention to what I was saying. In his defense, he was staring at my butt the whole time.”

Painter blushed something fierce. “That’s in my *defense*?”

“Sure,” Design said, turning, “it’s an honest explanation. I mean, it is a remarkably nice butt, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t think you’d noticed I’d been…looking,” Painter said, wilting.

“Kid, women *always* notice. I’ve only been one for a few years, and even *I* know that.”

“I…” Yumi said, “don’t think *I’d* notice.” She continued eating the food, which was more incredible with every bite. But now that her hunger had finally begun to be satiated, she was feeling drowsy. She’d lasted far longer this excursion into Painter’s world than last time, but she wasn’t certain how much longer she could remain awake.

“Can you help us, Design?” Painter was asking. “Can you find a way to fix what has happened to us?”

“I don’t know,” Design said. “I’m…not terribly good at this sort of thing. The guy you want is Hoid. He’s a pain in the butt—remarkable ones and common ones alike—but he understands Realmatic Theory better than anyone I know.”

(It’s nice to be appreciated.)

“Great,” Painter said. “So where is he?”

Design pointed. Yumi turned to see the statue by the door, posed to hold people’s coats and bags when they entered. That…was an actual person? Or perhaps another spirit? That made sense to Yumi, as the spirits she called often became stone or metal when transformed.

“Oh,” Painter said. “Him. You…told me about him the other day. I didn’t believe you.”

“Can we wake him up?” Yumi asked.

“You’re welcome to try,” she said. “I’ve been trying *forever*. Granted, as I told you, I’m not the best at this sort of thing. I *have*, however, established a reputable restaurant with a loyal clientele and learned to make *seventeen* kinds of noodles. That was on my list of human experiences to try, so I have to say, the visit here has been rather successful.”

(Sigh. Of all the spren I could have bonded…)

“So,” Painter said (lowly), “you’re saying you’re useless?”

“Painter!” Yumi hissed. “You can’t speak to a spirit that way.”

“Yes he can,” Design said. “I’ve insulted him like twice today already. He’s owed a shot back.”

“My apologies, honored spirit,” Yumi said (highly).

“Stop that.” Design rapped her on the head again. Which was *demonstrably* unfair.

“Painter,” Design continued, “I’ll try to think of something I can do, but this world of yours? It’s *strange*. The strangest I’ve visited—and I’ve been to *Threnody*. You have nightmares that come alive? Creeping out of a miasma of raw Investiture? That’s the kind of stuff you get on a planet when a *god* has been *killed*.

“It’s what we came here to learn about. Well, what *Hoid* came here to learn about. But he turned into a statue the moment we arrived, and *I* was left to experiment at being a small business owner running one of the most notoriously difficult varieties of startup. Here, have a coupon.”

She actually delivered one to Yumi, who naturally had no idea what to make of it.

“Anyway,” Design continued, “I’ll need time to think. Maybe the shroud and the nightmares are connected to what has happened to you two? I didn’t realize the other planet was involved. That might explain some of this. Regardless, for now I have other customers. And your body, Nikaro, is about to fall asleep in its soup.”

Indeed, Yumi was beginning to droop. She finished a few more bites, then went to excuse herself to Akane and the others—feeling mortified that she'd spent the entire meal apart from them after being invited. She told them that she'd been grabbed by Design and hadn't wanted to be rude by leaving. They appeared to accept that, but Yumi could tell—as she and Painter walked out—that the group thought she was odd.

"I've offended them," she said softly.

"They're the popular kids," Painter said—as if she was supposed to know what that meant. "Everything offends them." He looked over his shoulder into the restaurant. Then he shook his head and the two of them trudged back to his flat.

Yumi went into the bathroom and changed into the pajamas—which he'd been wearing this entire time in spirit form—then sat down on the ground and began arranging blankets. Painter, seeming pained, said, "We haven't even been awake six hours yet, Yumi. Can't you fight it off a little longer?"

She yawned. "I'm at my limit. Besides, we need to return to my world and get to work."

"Do we?" he said. "I don't fancy being yelled at by Liyun again. Here, what about this?"

He went to the hion screen and tried to get it to turn on. Oddly, though he couldn't touch other items, a little *zap* of light appeared at his fingertip—and the thing activated. "Ha!" he said. "That's something. See! I'm learning."

A pair of actors appeared in the blue and magenta. A man and a woman. *Holding hands.* Yumi's eyes widened.

"*Seasons of Regret*," Painter explained. "It's quite good. It's a historical, Yumi, taking place like a hundred years ago. They're old-fashioned, like you are! You're going to enjoy this one. Just watch."

She did so, ignoring her fatigue. It still seemed hedonistic how there were stories on this screen, all hours of the day, played out for anyone to watch. This world was so intoxicating, with its strange conveniences, wonderful flavors, and something even better than either: The dangerous allure of anonymity. Of living a normal life.

"No," she said, rising and switching the screen off. "No, I *cannot* have this, Painter. I am a *yoki-hijo*. I have a *duty*. And so long as you're in my body, you do as well!"

He sighed, sitting on the cushioned altar thing.

"We are going to fix this, whatever it is," Yumi said, doing her best to summon Liyun's force of will and sternness. "You will travel to my world, and you will *learn* the art of stacking. When we're in your world, instead of indulging in frivolity, I will learn your art."

"Painting?" he said, frowning. "Why?"

"In case you are right," she said, "and the spirits sent me here to deal with this stable nightmare you discovered."

"You'll be no match for a nightmare. It would be foolish to even try."

"Then I'll learn your art, so that I can go out in relative safety. There, I will then find a way to persuade others the nightmare is real—so they can deal with it. Either way, this is not a chance for us to relax. No more watching dramas. No more shopping. I am sorry for not listening to you before about going to meet those others."

"Yumi…"

"Do we have an agreement?" she demanded. "We do this as quickly as possible? You will subject yourself to my training in my world, and I will do the same in yours?"

His expression hardened. "Yeah, sure, fine. Not my fault if you don't want to take even a *single* moment to relax."

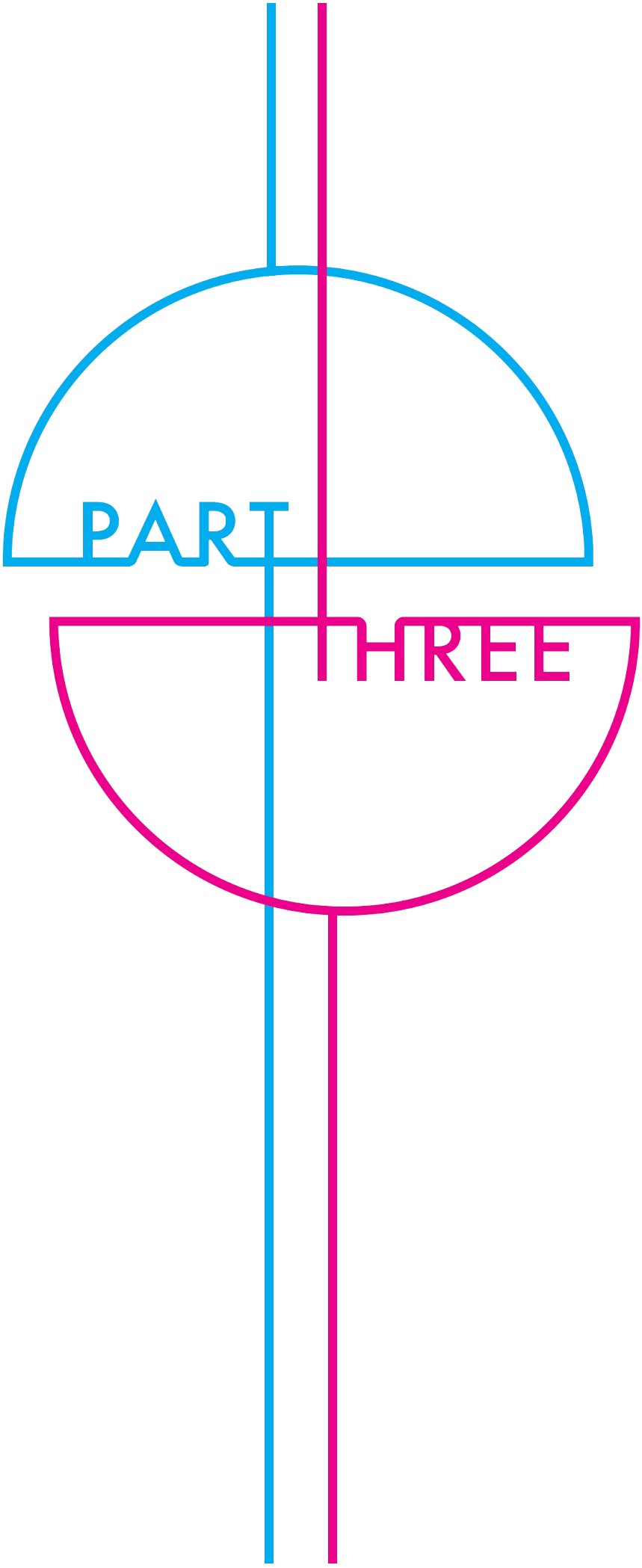
"It's not about what I want," she said. "It can *never* be about what I want. This is what must be.

You agree."

He nodded curtly. "I just want my life back."

I don't, she thought. Then quashed that thought immediately, instead lying down in the cold bed she'd made on a floor with no heat.

She'd resisted temptation. She felt sick at having to do so. Yet she knew, in this one thing, Liyun would have been proud of her.


PART
THREE

PAINTER STEPPED UP to the cold spring, then turned his back toward Yumi. She, in turn, did the same to him. The attendants removed his clothing, and he entered the water, turning his back once more when he settled.

They bathed in silence. He still wasn't certain why she insisted on doing this at the same time as him. She was so shy in some situations, but then ridiculously brash in others. Why?

What point is there in trying to understand her? He'd *almost* felt like they were connecting. She'd almost started to act like a *person*, instead of some kind of machine. Yet here they were, on her world again—which meant a return to orders and stern curtness.

He finished the formal portion of his bathing, with its ceremonial dunk, and the attendants left him to soak while they dressed. He floated on his back, staring at the strange blue sky, with plants hovering some hundred feet or more in the air. It almost felt like *that* was the surface, and he'd somehow sunk far beneath it…

"Liyun didn't come speak to us in the morning," Yumi said from where she floated somewhere nearby. He didn't look toward her. "So she's probably having trouble deciding what to say. We utterly failed at our duties yesterday. She will be humiliated. The thought of it twists my insides."

"You worry about *her*?" Painter said. "What about me?"

"You are nothing," Yumi said, her voice stern. "The yoki-hijo is nothing. When she arrives to speak with us—which she will inevitably do very soon—you will get down on your knees and bow to her in ritual apology."

"And if I don't want to?" he asked.

"My world," she said, "my rules. You *will* do it."

He sighed as a flock of distant specks fluttered around the plants. Insects of some sort, like moths, only more colorful.

"This way you act," he said softly, "won't get you what you want, Yumi. Not in the long run. You'll just end up pushing people away."

"As is appropriate," she said. "I am set apart."

He grunted, then righted himself and stalked out of the bath up onto the stones. The attendants rushed in from outside as he called to them—though they weren't quite ready—and began gathering his clothing for the day. Then, aggravatingly, Yumi proved correct—for Liyun strode up the path a short time later. Painter felt he should have been embarrassed for his state of undress. Even if they couldn't see him as him, it was awkward.

He was growing tired of that emotion. He couldn't summon the motivation to feel ashamed. Unfortunately, Yumi hurried over in a distracting state of half-dress herself—and that was far more difficult to ignore.

"Bow!" she said.

He reluctantly sank to his knees and bowed forward, putting his hands on the ground and touching his forehead to his knuckles. "I'm sorry," he said.

Oddly, Liyun knelt and bowed as well. He could see the motions even with his head lowered. She seemed just as ashamed.

"What is happening, Honored One?" Liyun said.

"Repeat this," Yumi said. "I cannot explain what has happened to me. It is as if another soul has taken residence inside of me, and it has lost all ability to stack."

"Your collapse," Liyun said softly after he repeated the words, "a few days ago. It has…left you affected."

"That may be true," Yumi said, with Painter repeating. "I fear I must take time, Warden-nimi, to practice. Perhaps even relearn the things I have lost."

Liyun knelt in silence. Painter felt his back ache from the unnatural posture, but when he tried to straighten, Yumi hissed at him.

At last, after a painful pause, Liyun spoke. "I will go to the leaders of the town we are now inhabiting. I will beg that they let us use their place of ritual for practice until you recover. They will be…shamed further by this, as they already believe their unworthiness before the spirits is the cause of your strange malady."

"I understand," Yumi said through Painter. "I am deeply sorry."

"That is well," Liyun said. "Perhaps your shame will lead to the spirits forgiving you." She stood up. "I will prepare the place of ritual, as you will want to start immediately."

Painter finally stood, and wasn't chastised this time. The attendants continued dressing him, their heads down, seeming humiliated by proxy. He didn't know much about them, having barely spoken to them despite all they'd done for him. The younger of the two was probably several years his senior, with an extremely pale complexion and a round face. The other was older, maybe in her thirties, with a longer face.

"You should not have gotten out of the bath until the attendants were ready for you," Yumi said, continuing to dress. "Next time, do not be so thoughtless."

He turned toward her to object, then blushed and turned away again.

"Do not speak," she continued. "The attendants will think it odd."

He forced down his words, and found they tasted unpleasant. When the attendants finished with him, they stepped beyond the stones to continue their preparations.

"Liyun does whatever you say," he hissed at Yumi, "doesn't she? So why don't you tell her to let you eat for yourself and dress yourself? Everything would be so much easier."

"Why do you think what is *easier* has any relevance for us?" Yumi asked, having finally put on her top. "Come, it's time for your first lesson."

THE FIRST PROBLEM was that Painter couldn't kneel on the stone like she said he should be able to. Even with the kneepads, it was just so *hot*. The air got underneath his skirt and made him swelter from within.

"Instead of kneeling, then," Yumi said, walking around him in a circle, "you will squat, allowing you to move more frequently and perhaps ventilate a little more."

"The rocks are uncomfortably warm to the touch," he said, gesturing. "I need gloves or something."

"You will adapt," she said.

"You want to wait for that and get nothing done today?" he said. "Other than me picking up rocks and dropping them?"

She regarded him with something akin to contempt, then told him to request gloves of Liyun, who fetched some from the town—it was nearby, mere steps away really. This place of ritual was an exposed section of too-hot stone with a little fence built around it and rocks strewn about inside that looked like the remnants from a quarry.

Liyun, fortunately, had managed to clear away most of the gawking townspeople. For his audience today he had only his attendants and a few of the town's higher-ups, who watched and whispered with confused expressions. The men wore beards like they did in old paintings on his world, but with clothing that was unfamiliar and too colorful for the bland or black-and-white image of the past he'd formed from old photographs.

The town itself was a huddle of barely under a hundred homes, with that strange water-collecting thing in the center. An orchard of hundreds of trees drifted and bumped against one another off to Painter's left.

"Why can't we go in there to practice?" he whispered, wiping his brow at the heat. "I'd like to be in the shade. It wouldn't be quite as sweltering that way."

"Most of the heat comes from the ground," Yumi said, frowning. "It's not that much cooler in the trees. Besides, *this* is the place of ritual. You'd have the people of the town move all the rocks just for your convenience? That would be a shameful act."

Of course it would be.

His gloves arrived, and he pulled them on—feeling annoyed at being forced to put on *more* clothing. He swore it was hotter this day than it had been on the others, and the light of that sun overhead did *not* help.

"All right," Yumi said. "Step one is to learn to evaluate rocks. To stack properly, you must balance—and to do that, you need to be able to judge each rock. Pick up one and heft it."

He did so. It felt like a rock.

"Note how," she said, walking around him again, "it is bulbous on one end, narrower on the other. Its center of gravity, then, will be toward the bulbous side. Using that, you can create spectacular illusions of stacking where it *looks* like one side is hanging out impossibly in the air, while the other side is heavy enough to balance it out. Precision work using other stones can enhance this."

"Center of gravity," he said, "and precise work. I thought you called this stacking of yours an *art*."

"Art is all about precision."

"No it's not," he said, passing the rock from hand to hand. "Art is about feelings and emotion. It's about letting them escape, so they can be shared. It's about capturing a truth about yourself. Like you're ripping a hole in your chest and exposing your soul."

"Pretty words," she said, "but meaningless. Poetry is a luxury. And we—"

"—have no claim upon luxuries."

"Exactly," she said.

"This is stupid," he said, dropping the rock. "This entire world is stupid, Yumi. You don't need a hero. You need an *accountant*."

She glared at him. Silent. Intense. Until finally he picked the rock back up. "Fine," he said. "How do I stack it?"

"You don't, not yet," she said. "Drop it and pick up another one. Today we will focus only on weighing rocks."

"Seriously?" he said. "I'm going to spend all day just *picking them up*."

"Yes," she said. "We'll likely do that tomorrow as well. Might spend as much as a week getting a feel for the stones. In my training, we spent multiple months."

"You're…" He stopped himself. He'd been about to say, "You're kidding." But of course she wasn't. Because kidding—indeed, smiling or joking in any way—was a luxury. She wouldn't understand such things.

Too bad. Because the greatest joke *he'd* ever experienced was the one the cosmere was playing on him right now.

Chapter 12

YUMI WAS TERRIFIED.

She wasn't trained for this. Teaching another yoki-hijo? This wasn't appropriate. It wasn't what the spirits had chosen her to do.

She was going to screw it up. She felt herself screwing it up as Painter proved to be a stubborn student. She'd been stubborn too, hadn't she? Liyun talked about how willful she'd been as a young girl, always demanding explanations before doing as she was told.

And yet…that tone in the spirit's voice when it had spoken to her before beginning their swap—something was terribly wrong, or was going to go terribly wrong, and *she* had to stop it. Possibly through Painter.

The spirits depended on her. She was terrified she was going to fail them.

"Pay attention," she said to Painter, trying to give her voice the same weight that Liyun gave hers. "Don't daydream."

He sighed, dropping his current rock. She'd caught him staring off into space, likely pondering clever ways to aggravate her.

"How," he said to her, "am I supposed to 'feel' the stones and 'know' them if I don't take some time to contemplate?"

"You don't need time to contemplate now," she said. "That's what meditation time is for."

"It doesn't have to be that strict," he said. "You can't just force every part of your life into some neat little box, with no overlap." He'd found a larger boulder to perch on, ignoring her reasonable instruction that he practice squatting or kneeling.

"Life," she said, "would be *chaos* without proper boundaries and guidelines."

He rolled his eyes. “You claim this is art, but there’s not the slightest allowance for an artistic inclination?” He picked up a rock. “If I really wanted to *understand* this stone, I’d think about where it came from, how these nicks got in the side. I’d look at the shadows created when the light falls on it, and the individual veins running through it.”

“None of that is relevant,” she said. “You need to know the weight of the item and how it balances. *That* is your art now, Painter.”

“Stupid,” he said (lowly). “*So* stupid…”

Each minute of training felt like an hour, with Painter needing repeated correction. As the day wore on, Yumi felt nothing but frustration. They had made *no* progress. Even after all her work, Painter couldn’t tell her how a given stone balanced.

Eventually he dusted off his gloves and removed them. She wanted to tell him to keep going, but his eyes were drooping. Considering how quickly they’d lost strength the first few days, it was remarkable how long he’d lasted: a solid eight hours.

Liyun entered the place of ritual. She’d spent almost the entire day outside it, watching, her normally unflappable expression growing more and more disturbed. Now she led the way back toward their wagon.

Should I, Yumi wondered, *let Liyun take over instruction?* The woman was certainly better at it than Yumi was.

Except…well, the spirits hadn’t chosen Liyun for this duty. They’d chosen Yumi. As terrified as she was of getting it wrong, it *was* her responsibility.

But what if Liyun did something drastic? That concern on her face had Yumi unnerved.

In storytelling, we pretend you can read all kinds of things from a furrowed brow or a fleeting expression. This is shorthand for a real phenomenon, but it’s more complex than we pretend. The longer you spend with a person, the more you know them. But beyond the obvious details like learning their favorite foods, we internalize the way that *they* react. The way that *they* express worry.

For some, it’s the archetypal furrowed brow. For others it’s the way they linger, the way they won’t meet your eyes. It’s more than eyes, more than posture, more than brow. Human beings are bundles of emotion puppeting muscles like a marionette. We emote not only with our bodies, but with our very souls.

Yumi could read what Liyun was thinking as they walked together. The woman was contemplating something dangerous. There *was* a fate worse than going back to basics with Painter. In an emergency, a yoki-hijo could be removed entirely from duty.

Yumi could see herself frantically trying yet again to explain the truth of her situation to Liyun—and the woman taking it as fancy brought on by overwork. Liyun did not like fancy. No, Painter was right in this. She would never accept some tale of a man from another planet invading Yumi’s body. Push too far, and Liyun would be forced to call her superiors and have Yumi…removed. Locked away, forced to do spirit summonings in a prison environment.

Yumi wished she could be as calm and positive as Painter. He yawned as they reached the wagon. But the disappointment, even anger, on Liyun’s face as she watched him step in, exhausted after a mere eight hours awake…

“Please,” Yumi said to Liyun. “Please, let me *try*. Don’t remove us from duty. Don’t send for the executors.”

“Hmmm?” Painter said, turning in the wagon. He’d forgotten to remove his clogs.

“Nothing,” Yumi said as he flopped down. The attendants hurried in to begin feeding him. They were too slow because a second later—

—Yumi opened her eyes and found herself in the jumble of blankets on Painter's floor. It was a uniquely surreal experience, as moments ago she'd been standing outside the wagon. Yet she felt groggy, as if she'd been asleep. Likely this body slumbered while they were on her world. Plus, they did lose time with every transfer, hours that were unaccounted for—probably spent with both of them unconscious.

Painter ran a hand through his hair, looking scruffy and out of sorts, dressed in the fuzzy cloth material that passed for night clothing here. Each time she'd been here, he'd spent all day in the same thing. The clothing Yumi was currently dressed in.

"You should try seeing if you can put on some other clothes," she said. "The souls of them, at least."

"The souls," he said groggily, "of the clothing?"

"When I'm a spirit, I'm able to touch the soul of the clothes I'm wearing to take them off, then put them back on. You might be able to do something similar with your other outfits." She turned and eyed the bathroom. So convenient to have a room like that, where the water flowed directly into the home. "I am going to experience another of those showers."

She strode in that direction, intent on starting off this day right. No more wasting time as she had the last time she'd been in his world. Painter yelped as she got far enough away that he was towed off the plush altar and to his feet. She glanced at him, but he just crossed the room and groggily waved for her to continue. She nodded, then shut the door and turned on the lights. Time for focus.

Unfortunately, as soon as she stepped into the steaming water—responsive to her touch upon the knobs, turning the perfect temperature at her command—she caught herself sighing and melting into the luxury. This place was *so* dangerous. Reluctantly, she turned the knobs until the water was uncomfortably cold. That chill seeped into her, deep down in her soul, dousing the rebellious heat within. That would encourage her not to linger.

She washed—an awkward act without an attendant—then stood shivering in the cold water and said her prayers.

Finally she stepped out and wrapped herself in a towel, then stood in front of the mirror to brush her hair. Here she missed her attendants even more. Chaeyung was expert at getting out snarls without it hurting, and Hwanji would hum while they worked, which was so comforting. They weren't her friends, as she wasn't allowed friends. Indeed, if she grew too familiar with them, they would be changed. Regardless, she missed spending time with them.

Strange, she thought, *how they barely touch Painter's hair when they get him ready. They see him as me, but instead of doing a hundred strokes, they run the brush through his hair a few times and are done.*

Curious. Design hadn't been surprised that Yumi could make this body look like hers. Yumi had rewritten Painter's shape somehow—and the method apparently had to do with her calling as a yoki-hijo. Perhaps if Painter were more skilled, he'd be able to make *her* body look like *his*? That would be a disaster of incredible magnitude, but perhaps it was what the spirits wanted?

She didn't know. But she *would* find out.

She finished her brushing, so frigid she felt like she'd never be warm again. This was her duty. She stepped toward the door, then paused. She was wearing only a single towel. But…well, it *was* just Painter. She pushed out into the main room, which was even colder than the bathroom. Her skin immediately puckered with goosebumps. She still half believed this place was the land of the dead and frozen spirits.

Painter stood near his heaps of clothing, and had changed. He wore stiff trousers, a simple shirt,

and then a second shirt over that with long sleeves, untucked and unbuttoned. It looked…sloppy, but in a managed way? A little like him, actually.

"You were right," he said, holding his hands to the sides. "I couldn't touch them at first, but then I…I don't know, I cleared my mind, then thought only about a specific article of clothing. When I reached for it that way, I could grab it. A copy of it, at least."

"Its soul," she said. "You *meditated*!"

"No!" he said defensively. "I was thinking about something. What I wanted to wear."

"You cleared your mind first," she said, pointing. "You *learned* something!"

He shrugged indifferently, then noticed her picking through the clothing Akane had bought her, so he turned his back toward her to allow her to dress with some privacy.

"Today," she said as she strapped on the bra, "you will teach me how to paint."

"I'm not certain I want to," he said, arms folded, facing away. "What I do is dangerous, Yumi. *Especially* if a stable nightmare is involved."

"We already decided this," she said, trying to dress as quickly as she could, to get covered in something that would hopefully keep her warm. "The spirits might have sent me to stop the stable nightmare."

"We *didn't* decide that," he replied. "We discussed the *possibility*. You can't face a stable nightmare, Yumi. They require the expertise of extremely talented painters—far beyond my skill level, let alone that of a neophyte."

"But we can't let it roam. You're the one who said that it will be out there hurting people."

"It *might* be," Painter said. "Or it might not. It appeared close to becoming fully stable, but what do I know? I've never seen one like that before. It could take weeks to complete the process, particularly if it's clever and careful. If that's true, someone else is bound to discover it eventually. Then the experts will get called."

"And if it kills someone first?" she asked.

He didn't respond.

"I'm r-ready," she said.

"Fine," he said, turning around. "I'll teach you, but *only* so you can defend yourself against…" He frowned, looking at her standing there in one of her dresses and tops, arms wrapped around herself. "Are your teeth chattering?"

"Is th-that what you c-call it?" she asked, her jaw trembling from the cold. "I've never been this c-cold before."

"*Never?*" he asked, seeming surprised.

"No," she said, shivering. "If you get c-cold, you just l-lie down. D-depending on how h-hot the floor is."

Perhaps showering in that cold water hadn't been the smartest idea. Her body was *not* dealing with it well.

"Here," he said, walking to the wall. "See this dial? Turn it up to increase the heat in the room."

"From the floor?" she asked, hopeful.

"Uh, no," he said, pointing at the top of the wall. "Vents from a small hion heater."

Pity. But she shook her head, and would have done so even if it had heated the floor. "No."

"No?" he said. "I can *see* you shivering, Yumi."

"I g-got used to this place after a l-little while before," she said. "Besides, it is d-dangerous for me to get t-too comfortable in your w-world. I will instead accept w-what the spirits have g-given me."

Painter gaped at her as if she'd sprouted leaves and started flying like a tree. "You," he said, "are

so (lowly) strange." He inspected the dial on the wall, then stuck his finger at it, fiddling. Soon after, a hum came from the vent.

"Ha!" he said. "I made the viewer turn on last time, so I *thought* I might be able to do this too. I can *feel* the hion lines. I couldn't move the dial, but I can tweak them somehow, make them activate…"

A knock on the door interrupted further conversation. Timid, Yumi answered—worried she'd have to lie again. Fortunately, this time all she found was a large envelope taped to the door.

She returned to the room and opened the envelope at Painter's insistence. Inside was a single sheet full of words. She'd rarely read anything other than prayers, but oddly this felt as if it had some of the same tone or formality to it.

"This is bad, isn't it?" she asked after reading it to herself. "I don't understand all the words, but…"

"It's a letter of suspension," Painter said softly, staring at the page with an uncharacteristic solemnity. "From the foreman. Relieving me of duty for a month without pay, as punishment for lying about my work."

"It says he went to the address provided but found nothing? Just an unoccupied home?"

Painter turned away, waving a hand flippantly in the air. "I'll bet he barely gave it a cursory inspection; might have even sent someone else. He's been *waiting* for a chance to reprimand me. Thinks I've been turning in fake paintings for some time now. Idiot."

"So he really *doesn't* believe you about the stable nightmare," Yumi said. "You were right about that."

"He's never liked me. Feels I shouldn't have been able to enter the job lottery out of school in the first place; hates that I drew his sector." He put a hand to his forehead, eyes closed. "At least I won't have to come up with some excuse for missing my rounds this next month."

"What…happens next?"

"It's my first offense," Painter said. "To the other painters, this will be described as medical leave. At least I won't have to suffer the embarrassment of *them* knowing I've been suspended." He paused. "Unless this lasts longer than a month. Unless I'm unable to consistently do my job. Then I'll get fired. Lose the apartment."

"We'll just fix our problems before then," Yumi said, confident. "Even if it requires me to find a way to deal with that stable nightmare." She stared at him, defiant. She wasn't certain if it was what he'd done with the heat, or if she was again growing accustomed to this place. But her shivering had subsided. That let her maintain some confidence as she met his eyes when he turned back toward her.

"I'll teach you," Painter finally said, and walked over to a large trunk beside his fuzzy altar. "But you're *not* going to face the stable nightmare, Yumi. I will train you to deal with an ordinary nightmare in an emergency. Then we'll go out at night and try to find proof of the stable nightmare's existence. Maybe we can spot it moving through the city, then lead someone else to it. If we have another witness, the foreman will *have* to accept that it's real. That will prove I wasn't lying to him, and he'll be forced to revoke my suspension and send for help."

"An excellent plan," Yumi said, nodding as she walked up beside the trunk as well.

"There's something odd about that nightmare, Yumi," Painter said softly. "When I found it, it *was* almost fully formed. I know I said otherwise, but…my gut says this one should have started rampaging by now. When the nightmares destroyed Futinoro, they didn't do it quietly. Yet this monster is subtle, sneaky. It's been days since I spotted it, and not a single attack has been reported…" He shook his head, then gestured to the trunk. "Open it."

She did so, revealing a collection of large paintbrushes. Some were nearly as tall as a person, like a broom with a brush on the end. Most were somewhat shorter, perhaps two feet long.

There were also jars of ink, all of the same dark shade, and some canvases. Painter directed her to get out one of the shorter brushes, along with a large pad of paper rather than the canvases—which he said were for painting when "on duty." The paper was for practice.

Judging by the fact that the pad was pristine, never opened, it didn't seem that Painter did much practicing himself. After setting the things out, Yumi noticed something else at the bottom of the trunk, easy to miss in the shadows. A large black portfolio tied with a cord. She reached for it.

"No!" Painter said, reaching to take her hand.

The transcendent warmth chased away the chills, erasing them from her body like the wrinkles in a blanket suddenly stretched tight. She gasped, then let out a soft sigh at the way the heat warmed her to the core.

Painter didn't snatch his hand away as quickly this time as he had before. He looked down at their hands, where he'd tried in vain to take hold of hers. Instead they had merged, the heat pulsing like a heartbeat and washing away all other thoughts and sensations.

Finally he withdrew his hand. "Sorry," he said. "But you can't touch that portfolio. *Ever*."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so," he snapped. "My world. My rules. You don't touch that. Understood?"

She nodded.

"Right, then," he said, stepping back. "I'll teach you how to paint bamboo."

"Wait," she said, frowning. "You have bamboo on your planet?"

"Sure we do," he said. "Wait, you have bamboo? It doesn't fly…does it?"

She shook her head. "It grows where the stone gives way to soil. Out beyond the searing stone, in the cold wastes. Few people live there because there's no heat, but I've seen bamboo around cold springs also." She frowned. "How do plants live here? There's no sunlight."

"What does sunlight have to do with anything?" he asked.

"It…makes plants grow."

"It does?" he said. "I guess that's how you survive without hion lines. Our outer cities have enormous farms where little lines of hion crisscross the fields and sustain the plants."

She tried to imagine that. There were places here other than Kilahito? How did one reach them? It seemed like everything out there was pure darkness.

Yumi put aside her questions as Painter began coaching her through painting bamboo. She still didn't understand why *painting* had anything to do with *nightmares*. They were…scared of art?

Well, she would get those explanations when Painter decided to disclose them. For now she tried to be a good student, to give him an example of how he should be. She did as he asked, kneeling beside the pad of paper to draw straight lines with the brush, and did not interrupt or ask questions.

(It's infuriating how many cultures think this is the best way to teach. They make it as convenient to the instructor as possible. As if learning were somehow a performance for their benefit alone.)

"You start," he explained, "by getting a feel for how the ink flows. Notice how it's dark at the top, then grows lighter the longer you draw the line, finally running out at the bottom. When you paint, you're not just creating something from your mind. You're seeing what the ink *wants* to become. You…"

He trailed off, and she glanced toward him.

"Never mind that," he said. "Here's how you make bamboo." He snatched his fingers a few times at one of the brushes and managed at last to pull out a copy of it. With some work, he procured the

souls of some paper and ink as well, then knelt beside her and showed her a specific method for painting bamboo. It was actually quite clever how he used the natural way the ink filled the brush to create a darker top for the bamboo, the lighter middle, then another blotch at the bottom where he paused briefly. There was something organic about the painting style, as if he were *growing* the bamboo.

He did it again, exactly the same way.

Then again.

And again.

"Bamboo," he said, "is easy. It's great because you can simply memorize the pattern—then create something that looks good with minimal effort."

"All right," she said, nodding. "I like how structured that feels. But…"

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." Yumi lowered her eyes. "I should not question."

"How do I know you're learning if you don't ask questions?"

It wasn't the proper way…but it *was* his world. His rules. "You said in the place of ritual," she explained, "that art is about emotion. I disagreed, and I like this way of making bamboo you showed me. I merely find it odd to hear you speak of memorizing a pattern, then creating without effort. I guess…I expected something different."

Painter stared at the soul of the paper in front of him. And then it vanished into smoke, drawn back to the body of the paper nearby. It appeared he couldn't keep something that way very long. Fortunately, his clothing remained in place… She covered a blush.

"Never mind that," he said to her, standing up. "Just practice what I've shown you. Draw a thousand of them until you can do it by rote."

She nodded and began, though her fledgling efforts were pathetically out of proportion. How had he made it seem so easy?

Well, she could absolutely do this a thousand times. That sounded like the perfect way to learn. She took the role of a dutiful student, proud of her example. She kept going, not saying a word, until her wrist ached and her knees hurt from kneeling. She didn't speak, didn't ask for a break. She would wait for him to offer one.

He didn't. He sat on his altar, expression distant, the entire time. He…did know he was supposed to be supervising her, right?

Finally she was interrupted by another knock on the door. Painter shook out of his trance, then looked toward her, finding that she was surrounded by dozens of papers.

"Yumi," he said (lowly), "are you still going?"

"You said to do a thousand," she said. "I am at three hundred and sixty-three."

He put a hand to his head as if befuddled. The knock came again, and he gestured toward her. She took that as permission to pause her work, so she rose to go to the door. She only cracked it open so whoever was there wouldn't see what she'd been doing, just in case.

"Hey!" Akane said. "Dinner?"

"Oh," Yumi said. Her stomach growled. But she would survive on rice cakes and dry noodles today. Painter had shown her where he kept more. "No thank you."

"Yumi," Akane said, folding her arms and leaning forward. "Have you spent all day in here?"

"Uh…" Yumi said.

"You can't come to Kilahito and hide yourself away!" Akane said. "I won't allow it."

Painter groaned. "She does this," he said softly from behind. "Adopts people. Um…quick, tell her that you've got to study."

"Study?" Yumi asked.

"Oh," Akane said. "You haven't placed in upper school yet? How much younger than Nikaro are you?"

"Say three years. But you just missed the cutoff."

"Three years," she said, though surely she didn't look *that* young, did she? "But I just missed the cutoff."

"So you have entrance tests in a few months," Akane said. "Well, those are *not* as important as

everyone makes them out to be." She fidgeted. "I'll bring you some noodles. But don't work yourself too hard, all right?"

Yumi nodded, then bowed deeply, glad as Akane finally retreated.

"What lie," Yumi said, closing the door, "did I just tell?"

"When you finish lower school at age sixteen or seventeen," Painter explained, "you take tests to place in upper school for professional training. It's kind of a big deal around here. The last few months before the tests, people spend most hours of the day studying. It will give us a good excuse for why you aren't letting her adopt you."

Yumi nodded, grateful at least that Akane might bring her something to eat other than rice cakes. She knelt to return to her training.

"Yumi," he said, "don't you want a break or something?"

"Only if you offer it, Master Teacher," she said, touching her forehead to the ground.

He snorted. "Master? Do I look like a master of *anything*?"

"You fill the role nonetheless," she said, still bowed.

"So, wait," he said. "You'd have simply kept going? Until what? Until you collapsed?"

"If it is required for my instruction."

"And…you'd do whatever I asked?"

"If it aids in my learning."

"I just remembered," he said, "that it's *essential* to the painting process that you learn to do it while standing on your head." She glanced up and saw him settle back on his altar. "With one finger up your left nostril. We should practice that now. Go ahead."

She almost did it. Almost tried standing on her head, while wearing a skirt, to test whether he *actually* wanted her to waste her time flailing around and likely hurting herself. It would have served him right.

But she wasn't about to establish a precedent by playing games. She instead rose to a kneeling position and met his gaze, feeling a frustration that she *should* have been able to control. "You," she said, "are not treating your position with its due respect."

"My world," he said lightly. "My rules."

"Your world," she said, "is (lowly) stupid. I'm taking a break."

She walked to the window, which she fiddled with and managed to open. Cold or not, she wanted some fresh air. Why did he get under her skin? She had legendary patience—Liyun had trained her to that end. Now she was snapping at a boy after he tossed a few half-witted jibes in her direction?

She breathed in the outside air, cool in contrast with the room, which had now heated up considerably. There was a strange *scent* to the air, crisp and inviting. Like the smell of freshly washed clothing. And the street below…was wet. She looked to the sky as wind blew water into her face. Rain. Rain that lingered on the ground rather than hissing away the moment it hit. How utterly bizarre. Why didn't the city drown in a flood of water?

That scent…was that what rain smelled like when it pooled? As much as she disliked the cold, there was something intriguing to scents and sights like these. Exotic and mesmerizing. Water that covered the ground…rain you could smell…and a street lit violet and blue.

She looked up and down the street, watching the people pass, carrying bright umbrellas and wearing clothing so varied it made her wonder how they ever decided upon anything. Perhaps that was why some women wore those indecent skirts that cut off mid-thigh, despite the cold air. Too many options overwhelmed the brain. It wasn't immorality; it was decision paralysis.

As she watched, her eyes were drawn to an alley across from the apartment building. She couldn't

say why. Something about the pooling darkness, though there wasn't anything to see. Indeed, there was literally nothing to see. Just shadows.

The cold of the night air assaulted her right then. The cut of the wind, which seemed to have found a sharpening stone. The bite of the rain, suddenly hungry. She closed the window and returned to her practice—six hundred and thirty-seven more bamboo paintings to go.

If she had looked closer, or if she'd called to Painter, perhaps they would have noticed a living darkness in the alley—one that brushed the bricks with its too-real substance and left clinging wisps of smoke trailing upward in the rain, as if from a candle recently snuffed.

Chapter 20

YUMI MADE PAINTER wait a week—eleven whole days—before she let him move to the next step of his training.

Eleven. Days.

He spent each and every one just sitting there. Picking up rocks and trying to judge their weight, their balance. Studying them, trying to "understand" them. Ad nauseam.

This was a new kind of boredom for Painter. It wasn't the indecisive boredom of someone with a hundred things to do, none of them particularly appetizing. It was old-school, despotic boredom—the kind forced upon you by a society lacking choices. A place where "free time" was a sin and "leisure" was a word used only in conjunction with the rich.

That sun made it so much worse. The heat from both above and below, Painter pressed between the two, the pancake between hot plates. There was a certain enervating effulgence to the sunlight, sapping away strength, leaving him lethargic. Perhaps, Painter thought, that was what the sun subsisted on—burning as fuel the willpower of those who lived beneath it.

"You must understand the stone," Yumi said, walking around him in a circle. Each time she passed in front of the sun, her form briefly diffused its light like a pane of stained glass.

Understand. One week later, and he still didn't grasp what she meant by this term. In fact, today—despite having promised that he could finally move to the next step—she made him do some weighing to "warm up."

Who would need any further warming up in this place?

"Close your eyes," she said, striding around him, wearing a bright green-and-blue dress, bell-shaped, with an enormous bow across the front that trailed its ends almost to her knees. It was shorter

on him of course, but didn't look *bad* really. He'd worn skirts as part of formal wear during celebration days, and while these colors were a little bright to be masculine among his kind, the people of Torio didn't care. Here men commonly wore pinks and yellows.

So he didn't find the clothing humiliating. At least it was reasonably comfortable. And today for once, the heat didn't seem…overwhelming. Was he changing, or was the weather just better today? Odd. And yes, the ground was hot, but at least those thermals constantly blowing upward were pleasant. They fanned out the bell and gave some semblance of a breeze.

(I haven't figured out how the thermals worked. My current theory is microfractures in the stones, with air being forced up through them and out. The plants also had something odd about them, to float as they did.)

While Painter didn't mind the clothing, Yumi's instruction *was* humiliating. One week, and still she didn't trust him to do anything without direct, condescending instruction.

"Close your eyes," she said, leaning forward to glare at him. "Now."

He sighed and complied.

"Now, pick up a stone."

He selected one. Most were new today, having been replaced overnight by the townspeople. His thick gloves protected his hands from the stone's heat.

"Feel it," she said. "Weigh it. Find the center of balance."

"You don't need to explain each step. I—"

"Hush," she said. "You are the student. You listen, I speak. That is the way."

Well, at least he knew why the spirits had made them unable to touch one another. Because he absolutely would have strangled her at some point during this.

"Do you understand the stone?" Yumi asked. "You may speak to answer me."

"Center of balance," he said, weighing the stone on his gloved hand. "Right here, when holding it on this side. Here when holding it the other direction. Three nooks—here, here, and here—where I can catch it on another stone for stability."

"Good," Yumi said.

"Shadows cling to this dimple here," he said, his voice softer, "and the grain goes this direction here—rougher near the top, creating tiny jagged shadows. It's not quite oblong, but shadows pull in at the sides, like a waist—and that's also where the single vein of quartz runs."

Yumi was silent for a moment. "How did you know that?" she asked. "I told you to close your eyes."

"I looked it over earlier, knowing you'd make me pick up a stone near me," he said. "You want me to understand the rock? That's how I do it."

"All of that is immaterial to stacking."

"It works for me." He cracked an eye to look at her.

"I should make you do another week of this," she said, folding her arms. "*I* had to do it for months."

"Go ahead," he said with a yawn. "Torment me out of spite. Waste our time when the spirits are waiting, perhaps in pain, for you to finish training me."

"Couldn't the spirits," she said (lowly), "*possibly* have sent me a man who wasn't so smug? There was *no one* else available?"

"Maybe," he replied (highly), "you're just such a *wonderful* teacher that they wanted to give you a challenge."

She glanced away, as if that barb had for some reason actually stung. He hesitated, frowning.

“Yumi?”

She held herself a little tighter, still looking away. “The next phase of your training,” she said, “is low stacks, focused on stability. The base of your stack needs to be the sturdiest part. Take fewer chances with the base; use it to give yourself as solid a foundation as possible, allowing for more daring choices later. Here, let’s begin.”

She knelt and grabbed the soul of one of the stones, then demonstrated stacking it on another, with their flat portions touching. Painter smiled, thrilled at being able to start at last.

Excitement for *stacking rocks*. Who would have thought? He squatted down carefully—even with kneepads on, he’d burned himself multiple times—and picked up a stone. He tried making a stack. The stones were unstable, so he tried again, this time aligning the centers of gravity.

He eventually got it. At her prompting, he added another stone. And it stayed on.

“Oh no,” he said under his breath.

“What?” she asked.

“This is definitely easier now,” he said, grabbing another rock and balancing it too. Then another. “A week ago, I could barely get three rocks on top of one another.” He removed his hand, letting the fifth stone balance. It was precarious, but didn’t topple. He looked toward Yumi and heaved out a long, annoyed sigh. “I can’t believe that your training actually worked.”

“It did,” she said, her eyes widening. “It *did*.” She smiled, eager. It was an intoxicating smile, for how genuine it was. Smiles, like radiation, are made more potent by proximity.

He added a sixth rock, and the whole thing collapsed. But she eagerly pointed for him to try another stack, so he did, and managed to get five again.

"It worked," she said, her voice soft. "I…actually…I actually trained you."

"I could have used a less tyrannical approach. But I guess I have to admit that you *kind of* know what you're talking about."

Staring at his stack, she looked like she might burst into tears. He managed to get a sixth, very small rock balanced on top before the whole thing fell down again.

"Six," he said, folding his arms. "Not bad, eh? So when do the spirits show up?"

"You'll need thirty stones or more per stack to draw them consistently," she said. "And one stack by itself is never enough. To be certain, you'll need twenty or so different stacks, in a pattern, arranged artistically."

"Twenty or more stacks," he said flatly, "of *thirty or more* stones."

"You can go less high with challenging stacks that look interesting," she said. "It's a relatively easy task to get forty stones straight up—but that should be done sparingly, as it's the interesting balances and odd-shaped stones that truly please the spirits."

He gazed at his little stack of fallen stones. He…didn't feel so excited anymore.

"Don't get discouraged," Yumi said softly. "That's what you need to *consistently* draw them. My first spirit came to me after only two weeks of training—but the next took another four months. It was years before I could do it every time, but we don't need you to hit that level of skill. I keep feeling that even a single spirit could give us guidance."

He heaved out a sigh, then nodded and gave her a smile. Unfortunately, she fell back into strict proctor mode, launching him into his next phase of training: forming solid bases for stacks. It wasn't *quite* as mind-numbing as the previous week's work. Neither was it exhilarating. It reminded him of his anatomy classes, where he'd drawn the same muscles over and over again.

Yet a little success brews eagerness, and the hours passed quickly. Particularly because Yumi seemed to catch the taste of success herself, and was somewhat less demanding. Instead of looming over him and snapping out instructions, she spent more time showing him examples. Sadly, she couldn't manage to build anything higher than a handful of stones before what she'd stacked started disintegrating to smoke. Her incorporeal creations had a lifespan of a couple minutes.

They stopped periodically for drinks of water, and remarkably Painter found as the day wore on that he was almost *enjoying* himself. He still didn't understand what was artistic about piling up rocks, and the spirits were an erratic bunch if they responded to it. But…it was moderately fun.

Besides, Yumi's enthusiasm was infectious. Halfway through the day he paused to watch her make a little stack of ten stones, her lips pursed, her eyes focused, but her posture relaxed—as opposed to rigid with worry in anticipation of a collapse like he was as he stacked. She moved with a flowing suppleness—scooping the stones up instead of seizing them. Encountering them instead of seeking them.

She placed many of her stones on their short edges and let pieces hang out to the sides to stack other stones on, forming little towers. Instead of making the obvious choice with each stone, she somehow accounted for its individual irregularities and fit them all together into an unexpected puzzle. Each new stone was like a key change in a symphony: Abrupt, yet immediately *right*. So delightful you were left surprised you had enjoyed the song before that.

She was right, he thought (highly). *It* is *an art. In her hands, at least.*

She was part of the art—her motions a performance to be relished, then remembered. It was… beautiful. If he'd been a spirit, he would absolutely have been drawn to this.

Unfortunately, her bottom rock vanished at that moment, and the entire stack collapsed into swirling black smoke. She sat back on her heels and released a long, trailing sigh—exhaled like a eulogy. You

know the sort. They're fashioned from the corpses of dreams.

Painter stared at Yumi, pained for her. That emotion, the one he saw in her face—he *knew* that emotion. He'd never thought he would meet another who understood it the same way he did.

Her passion, he realized, *is the same passion* I *used to feel.* Realizing that recontextualized everything, and he started to wonder if there were other things she knew that he once had. That worry she displayed…was that the same worry he had always felt about getting things wrong—about not being the person everyone thought he was?

Loneliness, even in a group. Shame and its stalwart companion: those whispers that say you aren't worthy of attention or love.

He understood. Without needing to touch her, he understood.

She glanced at him and he fumbled, collapsing the stones he'd been stacking.

"Put the heaviest on the bottom," she suggested. "That's not *always* the biggest, depending."

He nodded, hoping she hadn't seen him staring. As he tried again, he wondered how the last week had been for her. Forced to give him instructions rather than doing what she loved—she could have been constructing stone towers all the while. It felt more tragic if *both* of them had been having such a bad time.

He tried to see the stones as she did for his next few constructions, but that was less effective and he felt himself backsliding. He didn't have her effortless ability to evaluate, to see the placement for a rock, to visualize a larger whole. So he returned to piling flat ones.

She shook her head. "You'll need to learn to judge a center of balance for the entire tower, not just individual stones. You keep perpetuating imbalances instead of correcting for them with new stones."

"I…" He hesitated as he saw townspeople gathering outside. He looked to Yumi, who frowned. Liyun was supposed to keep the people away so he could practice in peace. What was…

They weren't gathering for him. Something was happening. He could sense noise. A disturbance.

"It probably doesn't involve us," Yumi said. She said it in a half-hearted way though.

Painter heaved himself to his feet, stiff from having worked so long in basically the same posture. He crossed the place of ritual to the fence, outside of which Chaeyung and Hwanji were also distracted by the crowding people. It seemed that a wagon had arrived? Yes, another floating wagon, larger than Yumi's, pulled by the flying devices made from spirits.

Painter absently pushed out of the place of ritual, noticing that Liyun had vanished somewhere. His two attendants yelped and hurried to catch up, trying to obscure him with their fans as he walked toward the crowd. Although he was clothed, he wasn't technically on display now, and their duty was to hide him.

"We should stay at the place of ritual," Yumi said, yanked after him. "Painter. We aren't to leave!"

But he'd seen crowds like this before. At the scene of a disturbance. A nightmare appearance. He pushed the fans away, and when they returned he pushed them more forcefully—and the attendants fell back. The crowd made way for him, speaking in hushed tones as he approached the source of their consternation.

It wasn't a scene of violence or fear, thankfully. The wagon had deposited a group of men with long mustaches, beards on their chins, and white clothing. Their most striking feature was their strange hats. Black, with tall backs and shorter fronts, like…well, kind of like little chairs. Only there were wings at the sides too.

"Scholars," Yumi said, stepping up beside him. She put a hand to her lips. "From Torio City. The *university*. I've…always wanted to see them."

"…heard of the unfortunate nature of your plight," the lead scholar was saying, "even all the way in

Torio City. So we have come to bless you."

He addressed the town's pudgy mayor, though the words were obviously for the entire crowd. The mayor, in turn, bowed to the scholars, then bowed again as if worried the first one might not stick. "Honored scholars," he said in the highest and most flowery of forms, "you are welcome to our humble town."

Painter frowned. Those were the kind of linguistic forms they used in the historical dramas to address a *king*. It left little ambiguity about how scholars were regarded.

Behind the four scholars, a group of younger men in smaller hats—simple black caps—opened the doors on the rear of the wagon, then heaved something out. Roughly the size of a clothing dresser, it was a metal construction with a great number of long rods. Spiderlike, if said spider had grown a few dozen extra legs.

"This town," the tallest of the scholars said, "has suffered an embarrassing flaw in our system. The most (highly) appreciated yoki-hijo"—he bowed to Painter—"is of course a revered member of our tradition. However, human beings are limited in their capacity, and it is *highly* inefficient that we must depend on them for the needs of our society. At the Institute of Mechanical Solutions, with the blessing of Her Majesty, we have developed something to aid in this situation."

He gestured with one hand to the machine, and everything clicked for Painter. Even before the assistant scholars poured rocks on the ground around it, he knew.

"What are they *talking* about?" Yumi asked.

She'd see soon enough. The tallest scholar held his pose for an uncomfortably long time as his assistants fiddled with the contraption. Finally he glanced toward the group, and one of them rushed up to speak in his ear.

Harsh whispers followed, along with animated gestures. Then the head scholar turned back to the crowd. "The demonstration," he said, "will naturally come after we've had proper time to set up and relax from our arduous journey."

"But demonstration of what, honored scholars?" the mayor said, bowing again.

The lead scholar smiled. "Our machine," he said, "for stacking stones."

Chapter 21

"IT'S AN ABOMINATION," Yumi said, pacing through Painter's room. "Worse, it's *blasphemy*! A dead thing can't summon the spirits. And if it did, it would be like lying. A deception. It… Why are you smiling?"

"Oh, no reason," Painter said, leaning back on his altar. "Please continue the rant."

"You disagree with me," she said, stalking up to him, her eyes narrowed. She was so angry she hadn't even changed out of the sleeping clothing, so they matched. "Out with it. Why do you disagree?"

"Well," he said, "I just find it poignant. The way you describe stacking—always focused on the idea of precision—is so mechanical. You complained every time I injected emotion into it, and once said you'd be better if you were a machine. Now…here we are."

She breathed out through her nose, then folded her arms. "I *forbid* you to find irony in this situation, Painter."

He raised his eyebrows.

"But only in my world," she added with a nod, "where my rules apply." She stalked in the other direction, trying to sort through the host of emotions arrayed to assault her.

A machine. To stack stones.

A machine to…replace her.

If it worked, would that mean no more yoki-hijo? No more girls spending their lives trapped by the invisible walls of expectation and responsibility?

But it was an *honor*.

Would it be so bad if no one had to bear that honor?

The spirits are in pain, she thought. *They want me to do something to save them.*

"I'll bet," she said, turning toward Painter, "*this* is why the spirits asked me for help. It's to stop that abomination." She gasped softly. "That's why they sent someone useless to hold my body… I needed to fail to stack…so these scholars would come and I could see their evil plan unfold!"

"I'll ignore the wisecrack about me being useless," Painter said. "I don't think those scholars are evil, Yumi."

"They are creating devices to replace the honest efforts of good people!" she said, spinning on him. "What if they made machines to harvest crops? To sew clothing? Soon *no one* would have anything useful to do with their lives! People would wither like fruit dropped to the ground."

"Uh, Yumi," he said, "where do you think those pajamas came from? The dresses you bought?"

She looked down at the clothing. She *had* noticed the incredibly precise stitches.

"We have the things you mention," he said. "Machines to help with planting and harvesting crops. Machines to make clothing. That shower you love so much? Another machine. Same with the viewer. And guess what? People in my world still have useful things to do. Machines require workers to build and maintain them, along with others to cultivate and position the hion lines. Your people will be fine."

"Your machines don't replace a holy purpose," she said. "The spirits will be offended."

"If they are, won't they just refuse to come to a machine's stacks?"

Well. Probably.

Unless something was deeply wrong. Something that prevented them from seeking help anywhere else.

Free us…

"Wonder how they're powering the thing," Painter said, standing up and glancing toward the room's light—which had a faint pair of twin colors leading to it, the ever-present hion. "Your people haven't discovered hion yet, have they?"

"I doubt it exists on my world," she said.

"Maybe they'll use something more ancient. Do your people have coal engines?"

She stared at him blankly. *Coal?*

"Guess not," he said.

"We're not primitive," she said, waving around the room, "merely because we can't make faces appear in boxes on the wall. *You* don't know how to make buildings float."

He didn't reply, so she moved a few stacks of painted bamboo and went about her morning routine. Once showered, combed, dressed, and the rest, she sat down with her ink and brush.

"I am ready for instruction, Master Teacher," she said, bowing deeply.

"Do you call me that," he asked, "because it annoys me?"

"Yes," she said, bowing again.

"You *admit* it?"

"Why *else* would I call you names you dislike?" she said. "I mean, I thought it was obvious."

He waved his hands and sat on his altar. "Isn't annoying people against the…spiritual girl code or something?"

"Your world," she said, raising her chin, "your rules. And from what I've seen, Painter, annoying people is basically a *religion* to you."

She *did* feel mischievous saying such things to him, and it would have been proper for her to stop. But…why was he so amusing to tease? If he'd bowed his head, she would likely have felt guilty. Instead he raised his hands toward the heavens and shook his head dramatically.

"I," he said, "don't understand you at *all*."

"I am your humble student," she said, bowing once more, "in the fine art of painting."

"I suppose."

"And in the finer art of being aggravating."

This time he smiled. Which worried her. Despite her intentions, she was relaxing too much here, wasn't she? What else could she do? She needed to enjoy this less.

Focus on the work, she thought, picking up a brush. "What is my next lesson?"

"Bamboo," he said.

Yumi turned to look around the room, which was stacked with sheets of painted bamboo. They'd had to go to the supply store *three times* during the week. She felt she should clean the quarters, as she was severely adding to the clutter. Maybe she could have Painter ask Chaeyung and Hwanji for tips next time in her world. Cleaning up after herself was novel.

No. Don't enjoy it. And it's not right to talk to your attendants. You shouldn't even think of that.

"I have mastered bamboo," she said. "Yesterday I taught you something new. In return, you should also teach me an advanced technique."

"There's no reason for that," Painter said. "You just need the basics to defend yourself in case of a nightmare encounter."

"I can defeat this stable nightmare with…bamboo?"

"No," he said. "Once again, you're *not* going to face the stable nightmare. If we encounter it, we're going to *run*."

She sighed but bowed, this time sincere. She needed to listen to his wisdom—well, his experience—in this matter. So she launched into more painting. Until a knock at the door drew her away. A glance at the clock told her it was late in the day—at least as this society measured it. Although Yumi and he always rose at morning in her world, Painter kept a strange schedule in his world, working when many others slept.

It was dinnertime. Or breakfast, for the painters. The other painters generally met before or after shift to chat, and Yumi often had to turn down Akane's invitations to those gatherings.

She pulled open the door, prepared with another excuse for Akane. Instead the *entire* group was standing out there. Not only Akane—who was stylish even in the trousers and painting shirt she wore on duty. But also Tojin, with sleeves rolled up to show his muscles. Short Masaka, with a turtleneck, her glaring eyes shadowed and lined with excessive amounts of dark makeup. Finally Izzy, the long-limbed girl with the bleached yellow hair.

"This," Tojin said, "is an intervention!"

"We're here to rescue you from your books, Yumi," Izzy said, grabbing her by the hand.

"I don't need—" Yumi began.

"We've all been there," Akane said, "studying for the tests. Yumi, trust me. If you don't relax now and then, you're going to stress yourself to the point that your mind rots. You *need* a break."

"Gotta rest the muscles between reps," Tojin said.

"Oh, *great*," Painter said (lowly), stepping up behind her. "I'd almost managed to forget about the weightlifting metaphors."

"Just some food," Akane said. "It's Ashday. Even *we* get a half day off work, trading shifts with Department Three so they can take time off on another day."

"Get rid of them," Painter said, turning back toward the room with a yawn.

Yes. That was definitely what she should have done. But the thought of another day spent painting bamboo again and again and again…

She looked around by reflex to see if Liyun was there to disapprove.

"Very well," Yumi said in a soft voice.

"Really?" Izzy said, jumping up and down.

"Wait, what?" Painter said, spinning.

She told the others to wait, then closed the door and hurriedly threw on a dress instead of the oversized painting shirt and trousers she'd been wearing.

"Wait," Painter said. "I have to beg to get a *water break*, but you can go to a noodle party?"

"You told me I don't need advanced techniques," she said, pulling on her short jacket, then checking herself in the mirror and tucking a stray bra strap back in place. "I have bamboo down, right? So I don't *need* further training."

"I suppose…"

"Then," she said, her heart fluttering, "I'm going to eat with them." She paused and looked at him. "Can I? … Please?"

"It's up to you," he said. "Anytime you want to go, you may. I'm not your master, Yumi."

Her choice? She hesitated.

What was she doing? She reached to begin taking off her jacket.

"Go," he said. "Don't think about it, Yumi. Just *go*. It's all right. I want to see Design anyway."

And so she did. Nervous, elated, terrified. She joined the others as they led her to the noodle shop. They mentioned going to some other restaurant, but they noticed how she panicked at that idea and quickly decided against it. In minutes she was seated with them, her money out on the table—at Painter's suggestion, she'd offered to pay as a thank-you—a menu in her hands.

She ordered a flavor of broth she'd never had before. After all, if she was going to be terrified of the experience already, she might as well add more strangeness. A short time later, Design waved for Painter to go speak with her—leaving Yumi with four people who were practically strangers.

It was *thrilling*.

They chatted about their vacations, and their wages, and the foreman. A verbal thornbush of interlocking vines and spikes in which Yumi didn't *dare* interject. They seemed to understand that she was already daunted by going out, and they didn't push her into conversation. That let her watch. Up close. *People interacting.*

She'd never been allowed to do that. She was to remain distant. In the common way of things that are forbidden, that made them mysterious. She was fascinated by the ways that normal people conversed, and joked, and talked over each other, and laughed, and…and it was like a performance, each of them with memorized lines. How did they know when to speak or when to stop? When to tell a joke and when to share some fact?

To try to make sense of it all, she decided to focus on one companion. As she already felt she knew Akane a little, she turned her attention to Tojin. Painter had said the man was always showing off his muscles to women. Yumi assumed it was to entice them to mate.

Liyun said details of courtship would only distract her from her duty, so other than some little tidbits overheard when she was younger…she had no *idea* how people paired off. She'd had trouble picking a *dress*. How did you pick a *mate*? She hoped, from what Painter had said, that Tojin would illuminate her.

He certainly did like exposing his muscles. Except as the noodles arrived, Tojin leaped up from his seat and rushed over to some people who had started sitting down at another table. None of them women. One was as bulky as Tojin—she wondered what beasts they fought, that they needed such muscles.

"Gaino," Tojin said to the overly large man. "You were *right* about the lat press. Look." He proceeded to *take off his shirt* and flex.

Yumi watched with eyes wide. Yes, glimpses of Painter when bathing had been one thing, but this was…illustrative. She barely remembered to chew her noodles as several other very large men at the table clapped for Tojin.

"What were your reps?" Gaino asked.

"Four twenties," Tojin said. "But if you lean forward instead of back, you can really isolate."

"I'm plateauing," another guy said, then flexed one of his arms. "Need to lose at least another percent. See here, you can barely see my outline."

"You look great," Tojin said. Then he flexed *his* arm. "But maybe try some bench work with some reverse presses?"

Yumi couldn't tear her eyes away. It wasn't that this was *attractive*. It was more *enthralling*. She didn't even blush. Instead her jaw dropped. It was like something in her brain had gotten scrambled and her responses were mixed up.

"Tojin!" Izzy called. "You're breaking the new girl! Stop comparing sizes!"

He looked back at the table, then *he* blushed. He scrambled to pull on his shirt again. It *could* have all been a display for her and the other girls, like Painter had flippantly said. Yet that didn't feel right. He seemed more excited about talking technique with the other men. And when he sat back down, he apologized to her with what sounded like true sincerity.

"I didn't mean to make a spectacle of myself," he said, lowering his eyes.

"I…" Yumi stammered. "It…um… What kind of beasts do you fight?"

"Beasts?" he asked. "*Fight?*"

"Those muscles," she said. "You train for…war? Battle?"

Izzy laughed so much she was likely to shoot noodles from her nose. Tojin appeared embarrassed. He was…shy? Really? Why would a shy person make such a display of himself, if not for battle?

"It's not for anything like that," he said. "I just like to make the best of myself that I can. See how much I can do. Reach my limits, then *pass* them."

"To accomplish what?" Yumi asked.

"That *is* the accomplishment," he said, then flexed his arm in a very specific way that made his *veins* distinct. It was almost grotesque, yet somehow impressive all the same.

"Our bodies are the most incredible tools ever," Tojin said. "Isn't it odd that we'll fine-tune an engine until it purrs, but never do the same for our bodies?"

She barely knew what that meant. But she did notice Akane gazing at Tojin with fondness. And when the woman went to get some sauce for the noodles, she put a light hand on his arm and then let it trail away. Tojin gave her a goofy smile, then looked down, grinning.

He actually *was* shy about women. Either that or Yumi was completely misunderstanding—admittedly also very plausible. But now she felt she understood the way a woman might look at a man. Liyun might have tried to keep her away from people, but Yumi still had eyes. Akane's way of looking at Tojin wasn't the stare of a hungry woman wanting to feast. There had been more than a few of those around the room earlier.

Did he truly want muscles…just because? Was this what happened to a society that had hion lines to do all the hard work? Was that…a bad thing?

"It's so odd," Yumi said. "When my brother was talking about you, Tojin, he…" She paused, realizing that maybe she shouldn't say it. Indeed, all of them immediately looked straight at her, intensely curious.

Talking to people was hard.

"…didn't explain that part," Yumi finished. "With the muscles. Why you're building them."

"I'm sure he didn't," Izzy said, with a smile.

"Where *is* he, Yumi?" Tojin asked. "If you don't mind me prying. I normally see your brother every night or two, patrolling near us. Foreman says he's on personal leave. But it feels like we should still see him now and then."

"He, um…" Yumi's heart started thumping. Could she go grab Painter and have him tell her an untruth? She decided on something that was close to what he'd said. "He has important work. Very important work."

"More important than his job?" Akane said, returning and handing the sauce to Tojin.

"No, no," Yumi said quickly. "It *is* his job." She leaned in. "He's hunting a *stable nightmare*."

She expected shock.

Instead Akane rolled her eyes. Tojin paused, then shook his head, looking down. Izzy outright laughed.

"You don't believe…" Yumi said softly.

Why did everyone react that way to Painter? Was he really *so* useless? Strangely, the thought didn't make her angry as it had before. This time she felt sad for him. Along with…an odd sense of indignance?

Surely they're being unfair to him, she thought. *He might not be the best, but he's* trying *to learn stacking. And he picked it up quickly.*

Perhaps, though, she could see why he had some hard feelings for this group, if their first reaction to this news wasn't concern, but dismissiveness.

"Enough, enough," Izzy said, holding up some paper with words written all over it. Not a book. This was loose-leaf and made at an awkwardly large size. "Have you read this?"

"Please, no horoscopes," Tojin said, emptying what seemed to be half the bottle of hot sauce into his soup. They all appeared happy to move on, without looking back, from the topic of Painter and his ways.

"Horoscopes are *forbidden* at this table," Izzy said. "They're a competing product. But this isn't even a *drama*scope. They're launching the ship soon."

"They said that last week," Akane said.

"The shroud was too thick," Izzy said. "But it's happening for real this time."

"I bet," Masaka said softly, "they are *very. Very. Friendly.*"

"They?" Yumi asked, glancing around as she slurped up a noodle. "What are we talking about?"

"The aliens?" Akane said. "Who live on the star?"

Yumi immediately started coughing. She drank half a cup of barley tea out of embarrassment, then spoke. "The *what*?"

"Don't they have newspapers where you're from?" Izzy said. "We've been planning a launch! Of a ship that can travel the space between worlds. It's been building *forever*. But it's finally time for it to leave."

"*Friendly,*" Masaka hissed, leaning forward. "Aliens are *all friendly*."

"You really haven't heard, Yumi?" Izzy said. "That's wild. I need my notebook. This is good information for refining your dramascope…"

"Hush," Akane said. "Not everyone reads the paper obsessively, Izzy."

How did Akane remain so dainty when eating? Was Yumi supposed to be that way? It seemed hard to eat noodles without slurping. She'd never actually eaten in front of anyone but her attendants

before.

"I'll bet," Izzy said, "the aliens are *hot*."

Yumi started choking again.

"Wildly hot," Izzy said, flopping back. "All the men dreamy. All the women sultry."

"How many dramas involve aliens these days?" Tojin said, with a smile.

"Like half," Izzy said. "And the aliens? Hot. All of them. Isn't it natural they would be though?"

"Um…why?" Tojin asked.

"I'm going to date an alien or two," Izzy said, lifting her chin. "It's in my dramascope. I'd never date one who isn't hot."

Yumi was glad for the others and their baffled expressions, so that she knew it wasn't only *her* thinking Izzy was strange. Even Masaka stared.

"Your logic, Izzy," Akane said, "is…um…"

"Terrible?" Tojin offered.

"I was looking for something more politic."

"*Allegedly* terrible?"

"You'll see," Izzy said. "When I have both a handsome alien hunk and a curvy alien knockout fighting over me."

"Excuse me," Yumi said. "I need to…um…go. For a little bit. For something."

She dashed off toward the bar, where Painter was chatting with Design. When she arrived, she found Design stretching something glowing between her fingers. Like a cord made of *light*. Yumi momentarily forgot what she'd been about, instead staring at that strange sight. A glowing rope, whose ends vanished into nothing.

"Your spiritweb," Design was saying, "knows what body is yours. It remains Connected to it, you see. You form Connections like that with everyone—and to a lesser extent every*thing*—you've known. Nifty, eh!"

"And that cord," Painter was saying, "is mine?"

"Yup!" Design said. "This won't cut it. Don't worry. I'm just lengthening it, and also checking it for problems. I couldn't think of much else to help—sorry, I'm incorrigibly useless at times. It's in my Pattern. But at least this will give you a longer leash, so to speak."

"What is she doing?" Yumi whispered to Painter.

"She's making it so that we don't yank each other around," he explained, "when we get too far apart."

"Technically you will still do that," Design said, "but the distance you can go before it happens will be much greater. I can probably get this to several blocks in length without risking any degradation to your Connection."

That sounded like a good thing, although something about it felt…regretful to Yumi. All these years, she'd been alone. Selfishly, a part of her had liked that there was someone who couldn't leave her by herself. She shoved aside such impious emotions.

"Painter," she whispered. "Do you know about this launch the others are discussing? A ship? Sailing the sky?"

"Oh, right," he said. "Yeah, it's more like a bus that rides hion into the sky. They've been discussing it for years. Off to…" He sat upright, then smacked his hand into his face. "I'm an idiot. It's going to your planet, Yumi."

"So?" Design asked. "Nikaro. You're not going to *sneak on board,* are you?"

"What? No!"

"Oh," Design said, sounding disappointed.

"It seems like a strange coincidence, doesn't it?" Yumi said. "That I should come here mere days before your people send explorers to my world. It could mean something."

"Wait," Design said. "Are you *sure* you're from that other world, Yumi?"

"No," she admitted. "It's Painter's theory."

"I kept noticing the star," he explained, "on the day when the swap happened. And, I mean, it makes sense. Her world, Design, has this enormous ball of fire in the sky!"

"Most do, Nikaro," Design said. "Like, practically every world but this one."

"They do?" he asked.

"Yup."

"Do they all have heat?" he asked. "From the ground?"

"Heat from the ground?" Design said, looking to Yumi, who nodded eagerly. "No, that's really strange."

"Could I be from some other place on *this* world?" Yumi asked.

"We surveyed the planet before coming here," Design said. "I didn't pay enough attention, so it's possible—but I think the entire thing is covered in the shroud." Design shrugged. "The theory that you're from that other world—the one that orbits with this one strangely nearby—is solid. You could be from somewhere farther out, I guess, but Connection on this level rarely spans that distance. It was, for example, super hard for me to leave my homeworld, given my Connection to it."

"Did you…see anything about that world in the sky?" Painter asked. "Before coming here?"

"Afraid we didn't stop there," she replied. "Heat from the ground, you say?"

"Yes, and plants that fly!" Painter added.

"Neat!" Design said. "Well, I might be able to confirm it to be sure. Your spiritweb's Connection to your world will be fainter than the one sticking you two together, so I can't see it without help. Hoid had some device somewhere in our luggage though…" She shrugged. "Give me some time. I'll try to dig it out."

"Regardless," Yumi said, "that group of people traveling from here to the other planet—probably *my* planet—might be involved in all of this. *That* might be why the spirits have done what they've done."

"I thought you were sure our swap had to do with that machine," Painter said.

"They could be related," she said.

Painter, remarkably, nodded slowly.

"You agree?" she asked. "We *agree* on something?"

"Not the first thing," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He smiled. "I'll show you. Tomorrow."

Chapter 22

THE NEXT MORNING, Painter awoke eagerly and stretched. The floor was faintly warm from the wagon having been lowered to the ground for the night. He could imagine how comfortable it must be on a cold night to settle down into that heat: blanket on top, radiance beneath. Like an ember crumbling into the bed of a fire. Though he wasn't ready to give up his soft futon yet, maybe there *was* something to Yumi's way of doing things.

Well, some of the things she did.

As she was drowsily sitting up and arranging her sleeping gown, Painter strode over to the door. It opened on its own, Chaeyung standing outside with a table and Hwanji beside her with a small tray of food. They arrived early and waited there, listening for noise so they would know when to enter.

Painter took the tray of food. "Thanks!" he said. "I'll eat alone today." He winked at them, then shut the door.

Behind him, Yumi gasped.

He walked back to his blankets and sat. Then he dug in, using the maipon sticks for the rice, though the attendants always used a spoon. Which was odd, but perhaps it was a ritual thing.

He looked up at Yumi's horrified stare.

"What?" he said, wiping his mouth. "Rice on my lips? Sorry. I was hungry." He dug back in, picking at all the little bowls of savory delights they always brought to augment the rice. That was a nice touch—made him feel like he was eating a huge feast, even though each side dish contained only a bite or two. Enormous variety, but in microcosm.

"Painter!" she said. "I… What…" Evidently she was having trouble speaking. Almost hyperventilating.

He paused. He'd expected her to be upset. He hadn't anticipated…well, this.

"Yumi," he said. "Breathe. It's all right. The world isn't going to end because I decide to feed myself."

She gasped more frantically. As if she thought, just maybe, the world *would* end.

He reached for her, but stopped shy of touching her. "Yumi," he said. "Look at what you've been doing in my world. Feeding yourself, moving around freely. The spirits *gave* that to you. They aren't going to care if I eat on my own."

She settled down nearby and held her head, not looking at him. That…really was a stronger reaction than he'd anticipated. Maybe…maybe he should call the attendants back. He turned to do so, but at that very moment the door swung open.

Liyun stood outside, immaculate as always, today in a bell-shaped maroon gown, her white bow tied tightly, not a hair on her head out of place. Though she appeared…more haggard than usual. Bags under her eyes. Had she not been sleeping well?

She stepped into the wagon, leaving her clogs outside, then knelt before Painter, studying him. "You look pale," she said. "It seems you have not fully recovered from your…malady last week. Perhaps you should lie down, then rise again, starting this day over. After you remember who you are."

"I remember," Painter said, then took another bite, out of spite. This woman…"Tell me, Liyun. As a yoki-hijo, is it my prerogative to choose to feed myself?"

"You are blessed by the spirits," Liyun said, enunciating each word precisely. "You are granted the *wisdom* to decide to *follow* their dictates."

"And if that wisdom leads me to eat on my own?" He took another bite. "I'm not on duty today; I'm just practicing. So if I feel that I should relax a little, what would you do?"

"I follow you," she said, "as is my responsibility. And *hope* that you are not becoming *unfit*."

Yumi's breathing became gasps again.

Painter didn't back down. Something about Liyun simply set him off. We've all had that experience with one human mosquito or another—if it's not the buzzing, then the leeching of our blood will do it. He hated how Liyun never said what she wanted, but instead left her intent to drip from cold words. Condensation of the pure essence of patronization.

"Do you think I'm unfit?" he asked.

"I do not decide fitness," Liyun said, bowing her head with what felt to him to be mock humility. "I only serve."

"Great," Painter said. "This is how you serve me today. Make sure I have peace and quiet as I eat. I want to consider the best way to recover."

"If that is what you wish," she said slowly, "and you are *certain* that you do not *instead* wish to follow *proper* protocol."

"Great, thanks," Painter said. "See you at the place of ritual. Appreciate your help."

She rose and lingered there, looming over him.

He took the hint. And tossed it back in her face. "Oh," he said, "would you get me a small paintbrush, some ink, and something to paint on? Leave it at the shrine. I feel like…painting today."

"Painting," Liyun said flatly.

"Painting. Yes. Thank you."

When he didn't respond to her looming, she—with obvious reluctance—withdrew. When the door shut, Painter left the food and crawled over to Yumi.

"Hey," he said. "Look, it's fine. She *has* to do what I say."

"I'm. Trying. *Not*. To scream. Right now," Yumi said between gasps. "Just. Leave. Me."

Well, all right. Her world. Her rules. Or something. He finished his meal, then threw open the door and nodded to the befuddled attendants standing outside. "Let's go."

They held up their fans and hurried along with him toward the cool spring. A moment later, Yumi was yanked out of the wagon after him. He paused. Hadn't Design lengthened that leash? They'd tested it, and it had worked…

She lengthened the leash between us on my world, he thought. *That must not apply here.*

Unfortunate, but Yumi *had* told him to leave her alone, so he said nothing. He continued on, all the way to the cold spring—Yumi trailing along behind. Once there, he stopped the attendants as they started to undress.

"I'll bathe myself as well," he said to them. "I'll take those soaps… Thank you. Oh, and you can put my clothing on that rock right there. Thanks. I'll call for you once I'm ready to proceed to the shrine."

They stood in place. He gave them a reassuring smile, then nodded toward the pathway out. Once they were gone, he began undressing. Yumi turned her back to him, like he did when she was changing—but with way more subtext. Hell, there was an entire encyclopedia down there.

He stepped into the cool spring with the plate of soaps, which was designed to float on its own. He knew the order of the soaps, and followed it correctly.

Yumi remained standing on the rim of the spring, not coming in. He was briefly tempted to yank her into the water, but resisted.

"I decided," he told her, lathering up, "that I'm going to do as you said. Embrace my place here."

She didn't reply.

"If I'm here," he said, "it's because your spirits decided to choose me. I've been thinking of myself as an imitation yoki-hijo, and that was wrong. I have been chosen just as you were. It merely happened to me a little later in life."

He went through the next soap, which was colored red and came as a powder. It scraped the skin, and he had to stand in a shallower part of the pool to reach his lower portions.

As he was stepping back into the water, Yumi sighed and turned around to face him, sitting on the edge of the pool. Painter hesitated because of his state of undress, but she was staring down at her feet trailing in the water, not at him. Besides, it was only Yumi. He continued on to the next soap.

"You claim," she said, "that you have started to *care* about all of this. You respond by breaking the protocol?"

"If I'm chosen by the spirits," he said, "can't I make decisions like this? Isn't that my right?"

"It is," she said, "but you *can't*."

He shook his head. "That is (lowly) hypocritical, Yumi. If I can make the decisions—if I *legitimately* can—then you have to let me do so. Liyun has to let *us* do so, even when she disagrees. Otherwise they're not decisions. Otherwise, what she says about us being the ultimate decider? That is an untruth." He glanced at Yumi. "And I know how you feel about those."

Finally, she sighed and pulled off her bulky nightgown—he had no idea how they slept in something made of such thick cloth in this overly hot world—and undergarments, then slipped into the bath. He held the plate of soap out for her, so she could make spiritual versions. She liked that, for the familiarity of it, despite it vanishing from her fingers after a few minutes.

They turned to their standard ritual, bathing back-to-back in the ten-foot-wide pool, close enough for him to periodically float the soap plate her direction.

"I can't refute your words," she said. "Because the logic makes sense. Even though I know you're wrong."

"That's because you've lived this so long," he said. "It feels normal to you. It sometimes takes an outsider to point out how broken something is."

He heard her sink down to wash out her hair, then stand up again. He scooted her the soap as she glanced at him, then she wiped the water from her eyes and pulled her hair back. "So *this* is the mysterious thing you said we 'agree on'? You made me wait a day to find out that—for some bizarre reason—your 'revelation' is that you should ignore propriety and piety?"

"We agree," he said, washing his own hair, "that it's okay to relax a tad. You went to eat with the others. I decided to eat on my own."

"Opposite actions."

"Done for the same reason."

"I think it's a stretch that we *agree* on this."

"Well, it felt fun to say," he said.

"This much confusion is worth a chance for you to make a little quip?"

"Well, obviously." He smiled, glancing over his shoulder at her. "*I* thought it was funny, at least."

"Funny? How?"

He shrugged. "Just…funny?"

She shook her head. "That is not what humor is like, Painter."

(She was, of course, dead wrong. Remember what the poet said: "Never let something trivial, like a sense of humor, get in the way of a good joke."

The poet was me.

He said it right now.)

Afterward, they both rested on their backs and floated for a time to soak, and didn't say much. Eventually they climbed out of the bath. He held the clothing toward her so she could make a copy. This, fortunately, did not vanish once donned. They didn't know why. (It has to do with them automatically incorporating the clothing into their vision of themselves at the time, but that's beside the point.)

The two turned back-to-back as a token nod toward modesty as they dressed. Which was amusing, since putting *on* clothing wasn't exactly the immodest part of the experience.

Painter found it aggravating how difficult it was to tie the bow on his outfit. He pulled it too tight, then tried it loose, and then looked flabbergasted at Yumi, who had tied hers into a basic knot like she often did. She shrugged.

"At least," she said to him, "I didn't dismiss the people who could have done this correctly for me."

A valid point.

A short time later, the attendants dropped them off at the orchard shrine, where trees drifted and bumped against one another like people in line for concert tickets. Painter felt bad every time they came here, as he knew for a fact they were interrupting the work of the orchard keepers. Then again, maybe the workers wanted an excuse to take a break.

Liyun was nowhere to be seen—the yoki-hijo was supposed to be alone during meditation—but she had done as Painter had requested, leaving a scroll, some painting ink, and a small brush for him. Judging by the symbol on the leather sheath for the brush, she'd commandeered them from the scholars. Well, they were probably too busy trying to make their machine work to bother with writing anyway.

"So why this?" Yumi asked, gesturing to it.

"Well," Painter said, "you keep telling me I need to clear my mind while meditating—"

"You do."

"—which is basically impossible—"

"It's absolutely not."

"—but I considered and realized there *is* a time when I mostly clear my mind." He held up his brush. "When I'm painting."

She cocked her head and watched as he rolled out the scroll, then knelt to begin painting. He started into it, expecting her to condemn him. If she'd hated it when he'd improvised earlier in the day, she would undoubtedly hate this doubly—as he was supposed to be worshipping the spirits at the moment. Or something. He still didn't quite get the point of this part.

"You're…actually trying," she said softly, surprising him. "You've given this some thought."

"A lot of it," he admitted, doing a quick painting. Just some flourishes of the brush to create curved lines.

She knelt beside him. "When I was painting those bamboo stalks, I…got into a rhythm. Time passed. Almost like I was meditating."

"So I'm right!"

"It's *wrong*," she said. "You're not supposed to *do* anything. But…it's right anyway, I think." She peered closer at what he'd done—a painting where he tried to capture a face in as few lines as possible.

"Is that Hwanji?" she asked, pointing.

"Yes," he said. "It's an artistic technique for practicing how to see shapes and lines in everything around you. You try to capture a person with only a few strokes."

"Looks easy," she said. "Like…you don't want to do all the work of a real painting."

"It's more difficult than it appears," he said. "It's like…like poetry written using the fewest syllables possible."

She appeared skeptical. "It's pretty, I suppose. But I do think it looks lazy. And it doesn't seem it would be of much use against the nightmares."

"It's not."

"Then why—"

"Hey," he said, "I'm trying to meditate here." He gave her a wink.

The stare she returned could have boiled water.

So of course he did a quick painting of that—her lips, eyes, the shape of her teardrop face. All done with quick flourishes of the brush to evoke the correct image. An artistic shorthand that had become a form unto itself.

She took this in stride. It was the kind of teasing he'd learned didn't bother her—or, well, it bothered her in the *right* way. If he wanted Yumi to play along, he had to tease *her*, not her station or the spirits.

He continued, and soon moved from faces—he preferred references for those—to his old standby. Bamboo. The more familiar the motions, the better he felt it would be for clearing his mind.

Somehow, an hour passed.

When Liyun arrived, he realized he'd filled the scroll with bamboo. A part of him was slightly disappointed—he'd hoped, contrary to what Yumi said, that painting would draw the attention of spirits. She said that although other arts could do it, painting wasn't one of them as far as she knew.

Yumi met his eyes, then glanced at the paintings. He could practically hear her thoughts—part of her had wondered as well. You didn't need to be in a place of ritual for the spirits to come; that was just where the rocks were stacked, where it was easiest. If skilled painting could accomplish the task, an hour spent here should have been enough.

Or perhaps his painting did not count as skilled.

Regardless, it had been relaxing. He smiled, tucked away his disappointment, and turned toward Liyun. "That was perfect," he said. "I'll want to paint like this every day, please."

"Why?" she asked.

"It is the will of the spirits," he said.

Though Yumi gave him a frown at that, he figured his words were true. The spirits wanted him here and meditating, so they would approve. Together he, Yumi, and Liyun left the shrine and crossed out of the orchard and through the town. At the edge, near the place of ritual, a large tent had been erected. He heard voices from inside—mostly sounding annoyed.

"Those scholars haven't gotten their machine working yet, I assume?" he said softly to Liyun.

"No," she said. "Their arrival was a surprise to me. It's an affront to us—bordering on blasphemy—for them to bring one of those here. I hate the things."

"Wait," Yumi said. "She *knows* about them?"

"You know about these?" Painter asked.

"It is nothing for you to worry about, Chosen," Liyun said with a wave of her fingers. "The efforts of the scholars are a novelty, nothing more." She hesitated. "Still, how *dare* they cart one of these to a village where we're on duty…"

She ushered Painter into the place of ritual, then roosted nearby, as if waiting for carrion. He settled down to practice, and was occasionally distracted by the arguments in the tent.

"That machine *is* why we're here," Yumi said softly. "I think we are to stop it, but we need confirmation from the spirits." She looked at him. "Well, keep practicing! No dallying. Just because you've decided to be insolent where protocol is concerned doesn't mean I'm going to let you slacken under my tutelage!"

He groaned, but went ahead and got to it, working hard on his stacks beneath the light of that strange sun. Why didn't it burn out? What *truly* kept feeding it?

After a solid few hours, the attendants brought him lunch. He again didn't let Chaeyung and Hwanji feed him directly, but—feeling magnanimous—he allowed them to sit and offer him utensils and napkins. Liyun's glare as she watched him could have boiled *stone*.

"I still worry she'll declare us unfit," Yumi whispered as the attendants left with their table. "She could send us to her superiors, for…special attention. It's what's done with yoki-hijo who grow too old, or otherwise infirm."

"What happens to her if she does that?" he asked.

"Well, she'll have to wait in line with the other unemployed wardens," Yumi said, "until she's given a turn with another yoki-hijo."

"Whom she'll have to train from childhood," he said. "Yeah, she's not going to take that step lightly, Yumi. I'd bet we could spend months, maybe *years*, practicing here before she gave up. She won't want to completely upend her life."

"She wouldn't want to," Yumi agreed, "but you need to understand: Liyun will do what needs to be done. She is strict with herself, not just me."

He wanted to dispute that, but… Yumi was probably right. Liyun seemed the type who drank her own poison. If only to build up her tolerance.

"I'm sorry today was hard for you," Painter said. "Maybe I should have talked to you about my plans. I figured you were fine shaking things up in *my* world, so I should have the same opportunity, shouldn't I?"

"Maybe," she said, rapping a stone to make him keep stacking. "But…it's different. You're wearing my body, Painter. What you do is seen as what *I* do. It's not the same way in your world."

He considered that, acknowledging that what he did affected her in unique ways. But he was increasingly certain he'd made the correct choice. If only for his own sanity.

He tried hard to do as she asked during training though, as a kind of…apology. He managed a stack of twelve that day—and not a strictly straight-up one either. It had quirks and some character. Still miles from Yumi's designs, but he felt proud nonetheless.

Liyun had left by that time to see to something, so the attendants walked him home. His body ached in that good way you feel after doing something difficult. Like walking a long distance. Or thinking of a really great pun.

Painter thought this ache might be what Tojin always talked about after lifting weights. Too bad Tojin wasn't here, actually. He'd have loved lifting these rocks; it didn't take long listening to him talk incessantly about reps and muscles to realize what an enormous nerd he was.

At his wagon, Painter nodded to his attendants. Chaeyung handed him his nightgown, laundered for the day. "You will…want to dress yourself, won't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"Leave your clothing outside, Chosen," she said, "so we can care for it." She bowed and walked off.

Hwanji, however, lingered. Painter hesitated in his doorway. He'd hardly spoken to the attendants, and to his embarrassment, he realized he barely knew them one from another—and any differentiation he *could* make was due to their looks. Hwanji was the shorter, more rounded of the two.

Yumi peeked around him, looking curious.

"Hwanji?" Painter asked. "Do you need something?"

To this, the young woman bowed herself formally to the ground—placing a small clog for her knee, using a cloth to rest her hand on the stone. The work these people had to do to not burn themselves was, as you might have noticed, legendary.

"Honored One," she said. "If Liyun asks, or…well, implies…will you make it clear that this new behavior of yours was not my fault?"

"Of course I will," Painter said. "But Hwanji, why would she even think that?"

"Oh!" Hwanji said. "Chosen, before entering your service, I was an attendant of the yoki-hijo Dwookim. She was…very vocal in the reform movement."

Painter glanced at Yumi, who shook her head and shrugged.

"The reform movement?" Painter asked.

Hwanji glanced up sharply. "I thought…you'd heard… The way you've been acting…" Her eyes went wide and she scrambled to her feet, turning as if to flee.

Painter seized her by the hand, stumbling and nearly falling onto the overly hot stones. "Hwanji," he said. "I've been so confused lately. *Please.* I won't tell Liyun, but I need to know."

The attendant looked back, reluctant. Painter dropped her hand, to let her go if she wanted. Instead she spoke in a small voice. "I thought you must have heard that…some of the other yoki-hijo…"

"Eat for themselves?" Painter guessed. "Dress themselves."

"Decide for themselves," Hwanji said, with a nod. "Live their lives, until they decide to retire? It is true."

"No," Yumi said, stepping down to the ground without clogs—but she didn't notice, so the heat didn't bother her. Being a spirit is like that. "No, she's…she's…"

"Lying?" Painter said.

"Honored One?" Hwanji said in a panic. "No, I would *never*. It's true. Everyone knows about the schism. Except…well, I guess, you…"

"Liyun trained me," Painter said, "and she never told me?"

"She and the orthodox wardens keep it from their Chosen," Hwanji explained. "It's vital to Liyun that she preserve tradition. Her kind try very hard. It is a good thing to remember the past."

"How many?" Yumi said, her voice hoarse. "How many of the other yoki-hijo are…in this reform movement?"

Painter asked.

"Oh," Hwanji said, looking away. "Most of them, Honored One. Of the fourteen current yoki-hijo, I think there is just one other orthodox. It…well, you wouldn't know this, but the reform movement isn't exactly *new*. It's a couple hundred years old now. Almost everyone else feels that there's no reason to be *quite* so strict with the yoki-hijo."

There were only fourteen current yoki-hijo? Painter found that tidbit interesting—Torio might be smaller than he'd imagined—but the other fact overshadowed it by far.

A schism in the religion.

A couple hundred years old.

Painter nearly laughed. He would have, if not for the horrified—betrayed—expression on Yumi's face. How could it be that nobody had ever *told* her?

She lives her life in ritual, he thought. *Who is there to tell her? Who is there to even (lowly) talk to her?*

His heart broke for her as she fell to her knees. "But…" she said. "But the spirits… They don't listen to these women, do they?"

As he repeated it, Hwanji spoke quickly. "No, no. Not like they listen to you. Don't worry, Honored One. You're the strongest yoki-hijo. Everyone knows it. Why, my old yoki-hijo, before she retired, she only averaged around ten spirits summoned per session."

Yumi wilted. "Ten. I…averaged around twelve…and most yoki-hijo draw no more than five or six, Liyun told me. So…"

So the spirits did not ignore a woman simply because she decided to eat on her own. Painter should have felt vindicated. Instead he felt miserable.

"The others…retire?" Yumi asked. "I was told…this wasn't possible. That they have to work even when infirm."

"They insist on being finished at age seventy," Hwanji said as Painter repeated Yumi's words. "And, well, I don't think the years until that retirement are quite as hard on them as they are for you. Since…" She winced. "They take days off. Whenever they feel they need them. Dwookim worked around half the days of the week during most of the time I served her."

"Days off," Yumi said, Painter repeating. "To do what?"

"Whatever they want," Hwanji said, with a shrug. "I'm sorry, Honored One."

"Thank her, please," Yumi said, bowing to Hwanji. "Thank her, Painter. For being the only person, apparently, to *care* if I knew the *truth*."

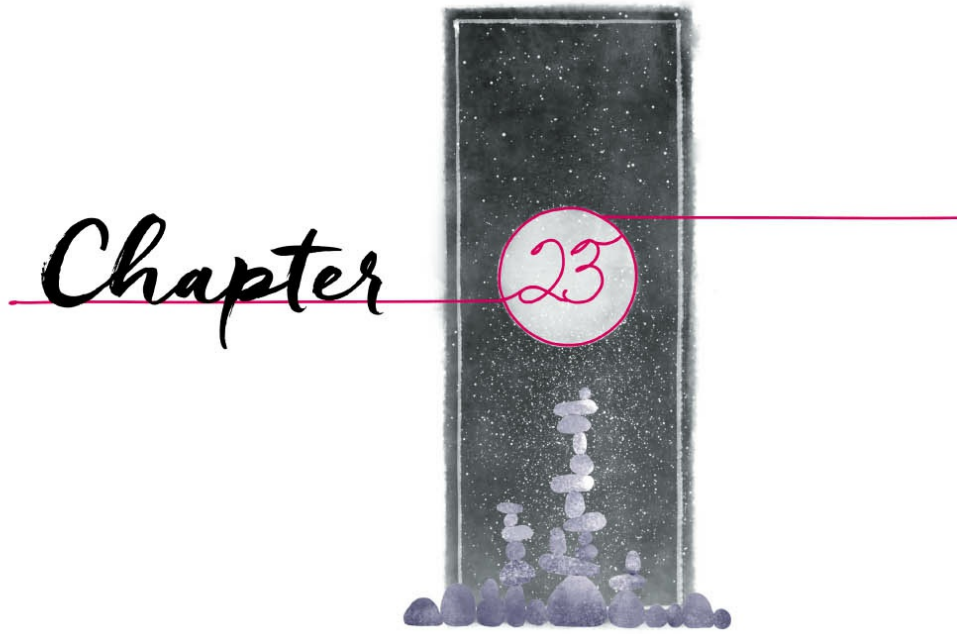
"Thank you," Painter whispered. "Deeply, Hwanji. I will pretend I didn't learn this from you."

She nodded and turned away, glancing all around her anxiously, as if frightened Liyun would pop out at any moment.

"It seems," Yumi whispered, looking up at him with tears in her eyes, "that you were right. Good job."

"Yumi…" he said, reaching toward her shoulder—then froze. He didn't want to inflict those feelings upon her. It felt like the wrong time.

"If you please," Yumi said to him, "would you go in and go to sleep? I have the *distinct* and *urgent* need to be someone else for a while."



TWO DAYS LATER, when they awoke again in Yumi's world, she was feeling *somewhat* better. She'd spent her day in Painter's world meditating while he roamed the city, testing out the new freedom granted by Design's change to their bond.

How quickly and naturally he had returned to freedom. Did he feel constricted now that they were back in her world, where their tether was barely ten feet long? What did it say that she'd stayed in his room thinking the entire day?

She walked to the window, gazing outward while listening to Painter fetch his breakfast from the attendants. She watched the rising crops creeping ever higher in the sky as hotspots on the ground went from warm to scalding. The plants spun like children playing in a rare spring rainfall. She watched them soar, and she envied their liberty. Even cultivated crops were granted more independence than she.

As soon as she thought that, she quashed it. Crushing her longing, her wanderlust, her dreams until they were flat as paper, more easily filed away deep within her soul.

Despite it all, that's still my instinct, she thought, listening to Painter eat. *I know I've been lied to. Yet my training holds.* It's a depressing fact. Abuse is a more effective form of captivity than a cell will ever be.

A quiet banging came at the door, and Yumi turned, cocking her head. Why was someone doing that? In all her life, when people wanted her, they simply entered.

Painter called for the person to enter. Liyun opened the door, dressed immaculately in white and dark blue, the long sleeves of her ceremonial tobok swallowing her hands.

She bowed. "Upon your pleasure, Chosen."

Painter waved with his maipon sticks for her to enter. She left her clogs behind and knelt before him in a posture that might have looked demure for someone else. Liyun, however, appeared unable to make herself fully bow her back, her elbows were too stiff on her knees, and she lowered her head barely a few degrees. A *technically* apologetic pose, by the strictest definition of the word.

She seemed sorry in the same way a tank commander might be apologetic after destroying your house. He might be in the wrong. But he *was* still in a tank.

"How," Liyun finally said to Painter, "did you find out?"

He continued eating, but glanced at Yumi, letting her take the lead. She nodded to him in thanks.

"Find out," Yumi said, "about what, Liyun?"

Painter repeated the words with an appropriate air of indifference. How did he manage that? She would have wilted beneath Liyun's glare.

"The reform movement," Liyun admitted at last.

Something had been straining inside of Yumi. It cracked fully when Liyun said the words. Until that moment, a part of Yumi had believed that Hwanji had been lying or confused.

"I…" Yumi said.

"Someone contacted me," Painter said, fabricating the lie with such ease it concerned her. "Someone who thought I was being treated unfairly. They left me a note a few weeks ago. There was no name. Just a random activist, I suppose."

Liyun swallowed this lie easily.

"You shouldn't have taught me to read," Yumi said, with him repeating the words. "I'd be a much better captive that way."

"You aren't a captive," Liyun said. "You are—"

"A servant, yes," Yumi said, with him repeating. "I know."

Liyun took a deep breath. "Is this the reason, then, for all the…strangeness these last weeks?"

Painter looked to Yumi.

"Yes," she said for him to repeat. "To an extent." The deception came easily to her as well. Frighteningly easy.

Liyun stood up and nodded. "Very well then." She turned to leave. "I shall meet you at the place of ritual, where I shall wait upon your needs for the day, Chosen."

"Wait," Yumi said through Painter. "That's it? That's the end? All you're going to say?"

"It is not uncommon," Liyun said as she slipped on her clogs, "for a younger person to seek to stride past their boundaries. I had hoped such a common attitude would not seize you, but we are all weak before the eyes of the spirits." She looked at Painter. "We are still the servants of the people. Even the most reformed yoki-hijo does her duty in that regard. So we continue. Besides, I know for a fact you were trained well. You will overcome this bout of petulance."

Yumi gasped softly. Liyun hadn't spoken to her in such a forward way since the first years of her training.

The woman turned to leave. Yumi found a word bubbling out, too hot to keep in. "Liyun!"

The woman glanced over her shoulder as Painter relayed the word.

"Do the others live with their families?" Yumi asked. "Do they go back to them? At least visit their homes?"

"It is not unheard of," Liyun said, "for a yoki-hijo among the more…liberal persuasions to spend a few weeks each year with her birth family." She paused briefly. "You'd hate it, Yumi. Nothing to do? Sitting each day with people you don't know? Strangers trying to pretend they're your parents? You would be miserable."

"Don't you think I would have wanted to have the *choice*?" Yumi asked through Painter.

"You have the choice," Liyun said. "You always have. Forgive me for not pointing you toward it, as it would have destroyed you."

She left then.

"I (lowly) *hate* that woman," Painter muttered.

"Please don't say that," Yumi whispered.

"You defend her?" Painter said, standing. "After what she did to you?"

"She's my…" She couldn't form the word. "She raised me. The best she knew how. And she is right; I'm still a servant of the people and the spirits. So nothing changes."

"Nothing?" he said.

"Very little of importance."

"Your happiness is nothing 'little,' Yumi."

"You think I'm happier?" she said. "Look at me and tell me I'm *happier* this way, Painter."

He met her eyes, then glanced away. "Well," he finally said, "I think you *will* be happier, once this difficult time passes. I think the spirits believe that too. Have you thought that maybe *this* is why they wrapped us up in this? So you could learn to be free?"

"Have *you* thought that maybe they approached me instead of any other yoki-hijo," she said, "because *I* was trained to be absolutely obedient to their will? Apparently that's rarer than I thought."

She stalked out the door that Liyun had left open. He followed behind, fortunately—because otherwise she'd have been yanked right back toward him.

At the cool spring, she tossed off her clothing and strode straight into the water, then dove underneath and let the soft coolness enwrap her. She turned over and floated to the surface, staring up into the sky filled with twirling plants, kept from drifting too far by the attentive crows and flyers. So far beyond reach that they might as well have been on another planet.

Painter stepped into the water himself, but didn't start washing. Instead he turned over and floated as well, quiet, drifting next to her.

Yumi squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to let him hear her sniffling. If he did hear, he didn't say anything.

"I'm glad," she whispered at last, "to know. Even if it hurts to realize how I've been lied to. Even if I'm not happier right *now*. I'm glad to know. So thank you. For pushing for the truth."

"I didn't do it to find the truth," he whispered back. "I was annoyed and reckless."

"That's what you needed to be," she said. "Maybe you're right. Maybe the spirits wanted this for me."

She had trouble imagining that to be true. Likely thousands of yoki-hijo had lived following the traditions she had. If the spirits had disliked this style of treating their servants, then surely they'd have done something about it long ago. The shifts in how her kind were treated seemed more cultural than doctrinal.

Though that raised an ugly question: Did the spirits care at all? She'd talked to them, interacted with them, petitioned them. They didn't think like people did. Didn't understand as people did. So why would they care whether she ate her own food or was served by someone else?

Before, her trust in the system had prevented these kinds of questions. Now no such barrier remained. Could she visit Torio City? Could she know her family? Have friends? Could she have something that resembled a normal life?

What even *was* a normal life?

"What is it like?" she asked softly. "Being able to decide for yourself what to do each day?"

"You've tasted it a little in my world. It's like that."

"It must be overwhelming," she whispered, "to simply…be able to do anything. To be able to make friends with whoever you want. Pick your profession. I can barely select a broth for noodles. You're so good at all of that, Painter. How?"

"It's…not as easy for me as you think, Yumi."

She turned her head in the water and looked toward him floating there, staring at the sky. What did he think when he saw the plants up there, so high? When he watched the flocks of butterflies scatter as crows soared past, sending individual plants spinning? Did he see freedom, or something else?

"Just because you *can* talk to anyone," Painter said, "doesn't mean you will know what to say."

"Is that why things are so strange between you and the other painters? You all have so many things you *could* say, that you don't know *what* to say?"

"Something like that."

"You could make other friends," she said.

"I've never really known how," he said, his voice low as he drifted. "It *should* be easy. Everyone else makes it seem that way. But…if that's the case…why didn't it work for me?"

"You didn't try hard enough, maybe?" she said.

"That's what my parents say," he said. "That I should just go…try. 'Just go talk to someone!' they'd say. So I would. I'd gather my courage, stumble over, and say the wrong things. I'd feel like an awkward fool, and people would laugh at me. After that my parents would say, 'Well, you shouldn't have done it *that* way, son.' But what *is* the way?"

He turned his head to look toward her. "I know it sounds ridiculous to you. I had all the opportunities. My life was easy, liberated. But…I always felt like I was standing on the other side of a large glass window. I could see the world passing beyond it, could even pretend I was part of it. But that barrier was still there. Separating me from everyone else." He looked away. "That sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"No…" She closed her eyes. "I understand invisible walls, Painter."

She let her hand float outward, near his. She could feel him doing the same, reaching toward her, then stopping. And she wondered. She could touch the water, float in it, because she felt she *should*. She could pick up clothing for a similar reason.

Was there a version of this, a way of thinking, where she could touch him? She let her fingers brush his.

It didn't work—instead of feeling his fingers, she felt that shiver, that burst of warmth travel up through her arm and strike her to the core. She gasped, splashing upright at the shock of it. Then she sank down so only her head showed. He sputtered and turned toward her, water streaming across his face.

"Painter," she said, eager. "Let's break the rules. Even Liyun agrees…I can do that! Let's *try* it."

"Isn't that what I've been doing?" he said, wiping his face.

"Let's do something *more*," she said, her eyes wide. "Let's do something crazy. Something unexpected."

"Like what?"

"I don't know! You choose. You're the one with free will."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"I might have it too," she admitted, "but mine is provisional. Come on. What are we going to do?"

He studied her for a moment, then blushed deeply. What was that about?

Oh.

"Seriously?" she said, splashing him. "*That's* where your mind went?"

"You're surprised?" he said, gesturing. "Really?" He shook his head, then began soaping up to start the actual bathing part of, well, bathing.

She considered, and soon felt foolish for her sudden impulse to violate rules. What would she have done if she'd been alone? Run through the town insulting people? Stare at each and every person instead of lowering her eyes? A part of her was tickled at the thought.

"What if," Painter said, "we figured out what those scholars are doing in that tent of theirs?"

"What?" Yumi rose and took some soap. "By asking them?"

"Um, no, Yumi." He smiled. "We would not ask."

"What would we do, then?"

"Sneak into their tent," he said, making sneaking motions with his fingers. "See what we can learn about their equipment. Maybe sabotage it."

She felt her jaw drop, gritty soap powder trickling through her fingers.

He noticed, pausing, and looked toward her. "What?"

"*Painter,*" she said. "That would be *illegal*!"

"You wanted to do something transgressive!"

"Like getting dressed, then running out and hopping up and down in full sight of people in the town!" She wilted, thinking about how embarrassing that would be. "Maybe behind a fan or two."

"The spirits want us to accomplish something," he said. "And you're right—it's probably not you learning how to eat by yourself. You still think our task has to do with that machine?"

She nodded, dunked to rinse off soap, then rose. "I do."

"Then we need information," he said. "So…"

She stepped closer to him in the water, then found herself grinning, hands held close to her chin, elbows tight against her sides. "Let's do it." After all, it was *probably* the will of the spirits. "But how? We'll be spotted for certain."

This would be a test. Surely if actively breaking the law didn't anger the spirits, then…well, nothing short of outright insulting them would do so.

"It's a good thing everyone leaves us alone for several hours a day, isn't it?" Painter glanced at her and smiled. "In a place nobody can approach, and where they've even helpfully cleared away the casual workers who might catch us sneaking out. Convenient, eh?"

She nodded, conflicted by how eager she felt. She could barely wait the time it took to wash off—going through the ritual soaps at blinding speed—and get dressed. Painter didn't seem nervous at all as Chaeyung and Hwanji led them down the path into the orchard, among the drifting trees, to the elevated shrine. But he ignored the painting supplies today, kneeling until Chaeyung and Hwanji were out of sight.

Then he looked to Yumi, who nodded eagerly, her heart—well, she didn't have one in this form, but she felt like she did—racing and her hands trembling. This was going to be so *wrong*!

The first thing Painter did was pick up his clogs, take off his stockings, then wrap the cloth around the wood. "Can't do much sneaking if I make a clop each time I step."

"Wow," Yumi said. "You know a lot about this."

He blushed. "It happens a lot in the dramas. There, people generally remove their shoes entirely. I thought maybe I should do this instead, to avoid screaming from pain at every step."

He tried on the clogs and found them significantly muffled with the cloth around them. (If you're trying to judge the heat of the ground in Torio, the stone in their settlements wasn't nearly hot enough to set cloth aflame. It could burn you if you left your skin touching it for an extended period, but

except at hotspots a casual brush wouldn't do damage.)

He nodded to her, then hopped down off the shrine. She hesitated. This was the moment. Was she *really* going to do this? After a lifetime of training in proper behavior?

She squeezed her eyes closed and followed him, cracking one eye, then the other. Painter hadn't noticed her worry—he'd moved over to one of the larger trees and was pushing it with his finger, making it drift around on its chain.

"How do these trees float again?" he said.

"On thermals."

He nudged another tree with his finger. "They're so *light*. Even if they're floating, I shouldn't be able to move them around this easily." He touched one, then hopped back, looking at his hand.

"What?" she asked.

"I felt lighter when I touched it," he said, trying once more. Then he wrapped both arms around a trunk. "That's so *surreal*. I feel like a balloon."

"A what?"

"I'll show you sometime," he said, stepping back away from the tree. "The trees might float on thermals, Yumi, but they somehow make themselves lighter first."

(He was right. If you've been wondering how they work, this is a big clue. Plants on Yumi's world don't really defy physics so much as they sneak past while physics is distracted by a nice drama on the viewer. Probably something involving pendulums. Physics loves those things.)

Feeling an increasing sense of transgressive elation, Yumi followed Painter among the lazy trees, which opened and closed pathways as they drifted on their chains. She quickly realized that she had no sense of how the village was laid out, aside from the steamwell at the center, the hills with the cold spring off to the west, and the orchard to the south. Painter, however, seemed to have a better feel for it. Perhaps that was the sort of skill you picked up when you didn't always have someone to lead you everywhere you needed to be.

He managed to avoid sections where workers were harvesting nuts from the trees. Then he led Yumi to the edge of the orchard, near the eastern side of the town—close to the place of ritual. Here he crouched beside a tree.

Though he'd gotten them close, the tent the scholars had set up was still a good fifty yards away. Over hot stone, past the fence around the place of ritual. A set of three large trees had been chained to the ground near the rear of the scholars' tent to provide shade. That would give cover once they approached—but first they had to cross fifty yards of open ground.

Painter gazed down at the day's ritual tobok. The dress was bright yellow and red. "These stand out rather a lot, don't they?" he asked.

"That's deliberately the point," Yumi said.

He nodded. Then pulled his dress off.

Yumi gasped. Not for the common reason—they did bathe together every day. In addition, there were three more layers underneath. But those were *undergarments*.

"What are you doing?" she demanded as he shucked the *second* layer of skirt too. "Stop!"

He grinned and gestured to the final layer of clothing: thin silken trousers you might find reminiscent of pantaloons, dyed light brown, and a loose green overshirt. Also silken, shimmering, and way too revealing of his figure. Underneath that was the wrap around his chest, and that was it.

She silently prayed he wouldn't go any further.

"This," he said, "is remarkably similar to what men wear around here."

"Except not," she said. "Their outfits are completely different."

"Close enough. I think that from a distance I'll just appear like a worker leaving the orchard."

"If someone looks closely, they'll see *me*, practically naked and absolutely deranged! It's not going to work."

He gazed out at the tent, as if he was going to go striding out anyway, but didn't move. He glanced at her.

"I'll pull out now if you want," he said. "This *is* your life I'm playing with, Yumi. If I get caught, you'll have to live with it—assuming we swap back eventually. So…do you want me to stop? It's your choice."

Her choice? What a terrible idea.

But she felt reckless. And determined. Somehow at once. So before she could think about what she was doing, she threw off her overdress and second layer too, standing in her silks. "Go!" she said.

"Why…did *you* strip?" he asked. "You're invisible."

"Solidarity!" she shouted, then—taking a deep breath—started out across the stone.

Once, she would have assumed that she couldn't hide, no matter how good the disguise. She would have assumed that people would instantly know a yoki-hijo.

But she had lived in Painter's world. She'd been *normal* for a week and a half at this point. Well, at least during the half of each day she spent in his world. Perhaps…perhaps he was right and no one would notice.

She still felt like a field mouse. Yes, a little mouse that had dropped from its nest in the rice plant and fallen to the hot stones during the day, having to scurry for high ground in full sight of all the giant hawks and crows above. Burning up with each step.

She mistook every sound in the distance for a cry of alarm. She was certain every figure moving through the town was dashing to get Liyun. Everyone would soon hear that the yoki-hijo was crazy and running around in her underwear.

Painter just plodded along.

"Hurry!" she hissed at him.

"Hurrying ruins the illusion," he said. "Trust me. I've seen this at least three times in the dramas."

"Three times? That's the extent of your experience?" She jumped, looking toward a shadow cast by several rice plants moving overhead.

This was misery. Intoxicating misery. And despite his apparent calm, Painter seemed unable to stop himself from speeding up as they neared the hiding place. He practically ran the last few yards and pulled up against the trunk of one of the shade trees.

The little stand of trees, as she'd hoped, provided some cover. They kept snapping their chains taut in the thermals—since this was near the place of ritual, the stones were extra hot. Painter wiped his brow, then shook his hand, the beads of sweat evaporating quickly on the ground.

"How you people survive in this place," he whispered, "I'll never know. But we…"

He trailed off as he saw Yumi, her heart thundering like the ritual drum, her nerves dancers contorting before the spirits, her eyes the blazing bonfires of a night festival.

"You all right?" he asked her.

"That was the worst thing I've ever done!" she said, throwing her hands into the air. "It was wonderful!"

"Girl," he said, "you *really* need to get out more."

"I'm trying!" she said, with an uncontrolled grin. Then she pulled her arms tight up beneath her chin, her eyes going even wider. "We could run away. Escape together. Off into the wide world, like in the stories Samjae used to tell me…"

"Usually," he said, with a dry smile, "I prefer to go on at least one date with a girl before I elope with her. Call me traditional."

"I didn't mean it like that," she snapped (lowly). "It's just…this feels so liberating. And terrifying. They don't care. The spirits don't *actually* care."

"I don't know about that," he said. He pointed around the trunk toward the tent, hovering a few feet above the ground on its platform. "The spirits give you things like that platform, right? No cost? No price?"

"No price," she said. "They want to help, once we summon them. I think they find us intriguing and enjoy watching us."

"Sounds like they do care," he said. "About you. If not about a lot of the things you all have made up about them."

She smiled. "Right, then. What next? How do we get into that tent without being seen?"

"I figure you'll simply walk over to it," Painter said.

"Me? Why me?"

"Yumi. You are *literally* a ghost at the moment."

"Oh!" She looked down at herself. And despite wearing roughly the same amount of cloth she did when in Painter's world, she blushed at her state of near undress. "I guess…that's useful, isn't it?"

"For spying? It seems like it might be an advantage, yes." He peeked at the tent. It was large, almost more a pavilion, and made of thick canvas. It had been set up on a wooden platform some twenty or more feet across that had floating devices underneath to keep it off the stones.

"I wonder…" Painter said.

"What?"

"It's just…this is what the nightmares do at home. Sneaking around, hiding, peeking in to watch people." His frown deepened. "They can go right through walls. I don't suppose…" He glanced at her.

Yumi nodded at Painter in understanding. Then, reminding herself that no one could see her, she slipped out from behind the tree and crossed the last bit of ground to the tent. She hadn't wrapped her clogs, so they continued to clop, wood on stone.

That sound wasn't real. She wasn't real, not completely. When she tried to grab things, her hands passed through them unless she concentrated.

So…upon reaching the tent, she bowed to the spirits underneath, then stepped up onto the edge of the hovering wooden platform. There, she determinedly stepped into the cloth wall.

It, with equal determination, pushed right back.

Yumi glared at the cloth, rubbing her nose. Maybe she wasn't showing it enough respect. She bowed to the wall as best she could from her narrow perch.

"O wall of cloth," she said, "grant me the honor of—"

"What are you doing?" Painter hissed at her from behind.

"Petitioning the wall."

"*What?*"

She spun toward him and gestured to the tent. "All things have souls, and the soul of the wall is akin to the spirits. All nonliving things are of them! That's—"

"Yumi!" he hissed.

"—why they become statues when we make requests of them! And why rocks draw their attention. It's—"

"Look at your hand!"

She hesitated, then glanced at her hand—which in her gesticulating she'd thrust straight through the cloth. Huh. Had her petition worked? Or…

Or had she just not been paying attention? Design said they touched things they wanted to—expected to. So perhaps…

She closed her eyes and stepped forward, not thinking about the cloth. Doing that, she walked straight through. When she opened her eyes, she found herself inside the tent. And wow, the scholars traveled in *style*. Thick rugs on the floor. Fine pillows and cushions for sitting on. A counter with various liquors, and those serving boys—likely scholars in training—to wait upon their needs.

The lavish display was interrupted by the enormous metal machine at the center, its valves and bars open and gaping, like a heart cut from a beast with the arteries severed.

The lead scholar had a pinched face and almost pointed head—like a blunt pencil. He paced back and forth, looking less intimidating without his hat. The bowl cut of hair didn't help. It was the sort of style you ended up with when you assumed that because you'd studied literature and engineering, you knew your hairdresser's job better than they did.

"We should try the vacuum pumps again," the scholar was saying as he paced.

"It's not the vacuum pumps," said a scholar who sat on the floor beside the machine, tinkering with it. "It's the power source, Gyundok-nimi."

"We never had a problem with the power source for the father machine," the lead scholar snapped.

"Pardon, Gyundok-nimi," another scholar said, lounging in pillows with a half-eaten fruit, "but we *absolutely* have had problems with the father machine's power."

"The Incident?" Gyundok said—and Yumi could sense the capital letter there. "Hasn't been an issue for years."

The three other scholars shared a glance.

"Fine," Gyundok said, his hands going to his hips. "If it's the power source, you prime it, Sunjun. This machine is small. It will be safe."

Sunjun—the scholar working on the machine—raised his hands and backed away from it. "Not a chance."

"We need a spirit," said the man lounging in the pillows.

"Is that all, Honam?" the leader said, spinning toward him. "Our machine that draws spirits needs a spirit to start, you say. What a *useful* observation."

"Maybe that yoki-hijo will call one," Honam said, taking a bite of his fruit. "We could grab it."

"Have you *seen* her stacks?" said Sunjun. "The only thing she'll be summoning in this town is an apology."

"You try starting it, Honam," the leader said. "Once it's primed, it will keep itself going. Should be enough energy in this town for that. As long as we don't turn it off, we'll be good."

"We don't even know that it will work for the severing," Sunjun said. "Maybe we should rethink this entire fiasco."

"If it doesn't work," the lead scholar said, "then we'll try something else. But *first* we follow my plan." He peeked out the parted front of the tent, toward the town. "This is dangerous, what's happening here. Honam, prime the machine."

"No," Honam said. "Not a chance."

"I order you—"

"I'll do it." The fourth scholar spoke from near the wall, where he stood partially in shadows. Yumi squinted at him, making out a man with a full beard on his chin but a mustache that was failing to keep its end of the bargain. He stepped forward, causing Sunjun to scramble farther back from the

machine.

"It's a small machine," the fourth scholar said. "It will be fine. Just needs a little priming."

Yumi stepped forward, trying to get into a better position to watch as this last unnamed scholar knelt down in front of the machine and opened a panel. She had to pick her way between the others and lean in close—getting right to the edge of her tether to Painter—so she could observe as the scholar hesitated, then pressed his hand to a plate at the heart of the machine.

There, she was absolutely certain, two lines of light sprang into existence. One was a vibrant magenta. The other a liquid azure.

Hion lines.

She gasped, then clamped her mouth shut. *Then* felt immediately foolish. They couldn't hear her. So she leaned forward farther, inches from the man, to make certain she was seeing what she thought she was. Yes, those *were* hion lines. She couldn't mistake the distinctive colors. They connected the scholar's hand to the—

Another pair formed from her face, leading to the plate.

She yelped, jerking back. Lights went up along the machine's sides, and the scholar who had been kneeling relaxed visibly, pulling his hand away and wiping it on his trousers. The lead scholar and the lounging one cheered in excitement.

The one who had been sitting nearby though—Sunjun, the one with grease on his hands from working on the thing—ignored the achievement. He wasn't looking at the lights or his companions. No, Sunjun was looking right at Yumi.

She felt a sudden panic and scrambled away, grabbing the spirit of a blanket and holding it up in front of her. If they saw—

He continued staring at where she'd been. Not at her. She was still invisible.

"There's a spirit in here," Sunjun said, scrambling to his feet.

"What?" the lead scholar said.

"I saw a second set of lines," Sunjun said, pointing to where Yumi had been standing. "A spirit." He turned to fumble with some equipment, then pulled out a box with a trailing wire that he plugged into the larger machine. Yumi felt a coldness come over her. An actual *physical* coldness, not just a fear. The machine had stolen warmth from her.

Sunjun turned the box, and the needle on a dial atop it swung toward Yumi. She scuttled away, dodging around the scholars and running for the wall of the tent.

The needle followed her.

"There!" Sunjun said, pointing. "It's moving. Quick! Dig out the capture device!"

Terrified of whatever *that* was, Yumi closed her eyes and jumped through the wall.

AS HE WAITED for Yumi to finish in the tent, Painter spent his time testing his theory about the trees. Though these shade trees were modestly large, most of their bulk was in their foliage, not their height. Minimal effort got him up into the branches and among the leaves, where he felt more hidden.

The chain tethering the tree was looped here around the upper trunk, fastened with a sturdy clipping mechanism. That chain was heavy, but it didn't weigh the tree down—it just held it in place. Something was making the metal lighter, he figured, like it made his body lighter. As before, the closer he stayed to the trunk, the stronger this effect was.

When he'd first climbed into the tree, his weight had caused it to sag and thump against the ground. But if he hugged it tight, his cheek to the bark—the tree was wide enough that his hands barely touched on the other side—it lifted once more. When doing this, it was as if he became part of its essence and added negligible weight to its bulk. If he moved farther out onto one of the branches, his weight returned, his own flesh noticeable on his bones, his clothing settling back onto his body.

The tree, in turn, slumped downward and hit the ground again. Remarkably, these plants had *adapted* to this place where the ground was so hot. They had barely any roots, merely some curled vestigial ones at the bottom, like gnarled fingers. How did they manage to—

Yumi burst through the wall of the tent. Running.

Painter dropped to a lower branch to look down at her.

"Scholars saw me somehow!" she shouted, frantic. "They're coming after me! They mustn't find me! Or find you! Everyone will see me like this and know that we spied on the scholars and that I've given up all semblance of sanity in favor of categoric hooliganism and malfeasance!"

Painter wasn't sure what shocked him more. The fact that she'd been spotted, or the fact that she'd

actually used the word “hooliganism” in practical discourse.

Unfortunately, her alarm wasn’t exaggerated. Shouts sounded from the tent, and one scholar popped out around it holding some kind of device—which he pointed toward the trees where Yumi was standing.

“They’re going to find you up there!” she said, then began hyperventilating again. “You can’t hide. I’m dead. I’m over. It’s over. I-I-I—”

“Yumi!” he hissed, a desperate plan forming. The obvious one really, considering the circumstances. He held out his hand to her. With his other hand he grabbed the chain holding the tree in place, then he mouthed one sentence.

We go up.

“Painter, that’s a very *bad* idea!”

But the scholars were flooding out of the tent, and she didn’t have time to come up with something better. He gestured more urgently, and after the briefest moment she leaped up and grabbed the first branch.

He unhooked the chain, then climbed higher—where he was better obscured by the prodigious canopy—and wrapped his arms around the trunk, his heart pounding as he imagined their dramatic escape.

The tree began to drift sluggishly upward. Less dramatic. More torpid. But the scholars noticed too slowly, and by the time they started pointing toward it, the roots were barely out of reach. Painter buried his head among some branches so the scholars couldn’t make out who he was.

In minutes the tree had gained forty or fifty feet, and the soft wind nudged them vaguely to the south—and the orchard—as Painter had hoped. Landing in there would make it difficult for any pursuers to gauge where to find them.

Yumi hauled herself up, gasping for breath. He looked toward her, worried, but couldn’t move without jeopardizing their buoyancy. Thankfully, the tree didn’t seem to notice the weight of a ghost.

“Yumi?” he whispered.

She twisted around, holding tightly to her branch, and he saw she was crying, gulping in breaths.

And laughing.

He relaxed.

“That is,” she said, “the single most delinquent thing I’ve ever done. I don’t know how to react! I’m shaking like a steamwell the moment before it erupts. Yet for some reason I feel *good*. Like I want to do it *again*. I’m broken!”

“No.” He grinned. “You’re human.”

“We’re still going to get caught,” she said. “They’ll watch where we land.”

“Maybe.” He twisted against the trunk, stretching out to add some weight. That made their ascent slow as they continued to drift toward the orchard.

They’d risen just high enough to reach the bottom layer of the sky’s plants—mostly weeds and wildflowers here. The tree peeked up through the layer of foliage like it was breaking the surface of a lake. Flowers sprouting from the center of lily pads danced with bushes that spread limbs wide to catch the thermals. Leaves and florets—similar to the white sprigs that dandelions release on Scadrial, or duluko plants release here—swirled in the air. Butterflies exploded from a bush, fluttering to surround the tree.

The tree’s motion caused eddies in the air around them, carrying the various fecund flotsam in swirls and patterns. Painter breathed out, momentarily forgetting everything else. The flowers, the petals, the butterflies, the sparkling light—it was like paint thrown on a palette by a master of some

incomprehensible art form. A sudden improvisational beauty against the brilliant canvas of the deep blue sky.

Up here in the sky, beads of moisture condensed on fat, lush leaves. A certain wet decadence misted on his skin—like sweat but pure, tasting of something bright and clean.

That's why they rise, he thought. *The air is humid up this high, evaporated by the hot stone below. So the plants rise to reach it…*

In that moment he envied this world that had light in the sky, as fragmented sunlight caught the dew and made each and every plant seem like it was wearing its wedding jewelry. The scene changed and shifted, colors mixing and parting, all afire with sunlight, resplendent.

Yumi—farther out on her branch, almost joining the sights—seemed entranced. Her hair rippled around her, caught in the wind. She reached out as a butterfly landed nearby. It didn't see her, so she could lean in close to inspect its shivering wings.

She glanced toward Painter, backlit by wonder, and grinned. A plane of greenery bursting with colors expanded behind her like an infinite inviting highway. *Travel with us,* it said. Yet there was nowhere Painter wanted to go. Not when he had what he wanted with him right here.

"You're staring," she said.

He was a painter. Not a poet. But somehow he found the right words.

"I only stare," he said, "when I see something too beautiful for my eyes to take in at once."

She turned back out toward the landscape, apparently assuming that was what he referred to. "It's like another world," she whispered. "Always up here, every day. So close." Then she leaned out and looked upward toward the daystar. Painter's world. It caught sunlight. Shouldn't all of that darkness have made it black?

"If I'm to lose everything," she whispered, "I'm glad I saw this first."

"You're not going to lose anything," he said, recovering enough of his senses to lean out farther from the trunk and send the tree wafting down toward the orchard below.

"They'll find us," she said, turning toward him again. "They'll see where it lands."

He shook his head. "We'll be fine."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because this day is too perfect to be ruined now."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Liyun found him kneeling in the shrine, the very picture of innocence. If his tobok was askew, well, he'd only just started dressing himself—so it made sense he'd get it wrong. If he was breathing a little heavily, sweaty as if from an extended run, then he'd obviously been praying with vigor; communing with the spirits could be strenuous for the devoted. Finally, if there were twigs in his hair, well, the shrine was in an orchard. Those sorts of things fall from trees, I'm told.

Liyun folded her arms, inspecting him.

"Oh?" Painter said, turning. "Is it time already?"

"Did you see someone suspicious skulking through here?" she said. "There has been…hooliganism afoot in the city."

Ah, he thought. *That's where she got it. Makes sense.*

"I have been too busy with my meditations to notice," he said. "I'm sorry."

"It is…not your fault, Chosen. It is well that you are trying extra hard to petition the spirits, considering your failings lately." She gestured. "Shall we go? The scholars have gotten their machine working at last."

"Have they?" he said. "How unfortunate."

He rose and followed Liyun, Yumi trailing along behind him as if trying to hide in his shadow. Her expression kept alternating between ashamed and elated—the result of some strange emotional short circuit where both of her blinkers turned on at once and utterly confused everyone following behind.

"You're sure," he whispered to her, letting Liyun get ahead so the woman wouldn't hear, "you saw hion lines?"

"Absolutely," Yumi whispered back. "What does it mean?"

"Your people must be close to discovering how to harness hion," he said. "You're on the cusp of the industrial revolution. Things are about to change in your world, Yumi."

"Will it get dark," she whispered, "like on your world?"

"You mean the shroud? No, that existed before we discovered hion. Rather, before we learned how to harness it. Those were…difficult days. People wandering through the smoke, living only near bursts of light rising from the ground where plants could grow…"

He shivered, thinking about how it must have been. Traveling through the shroud via train was bad

enough. Walking through it? Living in it? True, nightmares hadn't been as common back then, but still.

"I have a history book in my school things somewhere," he said to Yumi. "You can read it when you're in my body. It will explain what might be coming for your people."

"What was that, Chosen One?" Liyun said.

"Just a prayer," Painter said, realizing he'd let his voice stray from a whisper.

Outside the orchard, they picked up Chaeyung and Hwanji—and for once Painter crossed the town without being gawked at. Everyone was gathered at the place of ritual. As he approached, they made way for him, letting him step up near the tent. Here, the scholars had deposited their four-foot-wide machine amid a large number of stones. These were generally smaller than the ones in the place of ritual, but the mechanical thing was moving with eerily smooth motions, making four separate stacks of rocks at once.

"We can beat that," Yumi said. "Look at how *pedestrian* those stacks are! Straight up and down."

Painter was intimidated anyway—even as the machine accidentally knocked over one stack and had to clear it away with three arms before starting again. Yumi might have been able to beat it, but his stacks were nowhere near as good as these.

Still, bolstered by her determination, he stepped into the place of ritual and set to work. He was surprised to find he welcomed the activity of stacking. A lot had happened in the last day, and this return to something normal comforted him. Which says a lot about the human ability to redefine what the word "normal" means.

He soon worked up a sweat—but his stack fell at the seventh stone. The next one only made it to six. He growled and slammed his fist into the ground, barely noticing its heat.

"Relax," Yumi said. "Meditate a moment. You can't stack if your hands are shaking."

He fought down his annoyance. She was right. He took a few deep breaths, then started over.

Hours passed, but most of the townspeople didn't leave. They seemed to sense something was happening here as Painter managed a stack of ten, then a stack of nine, then a stack of *twelve* all in a row. Leaving those three in a line, he started into a fourth one, wiping his hands on his skirt to dry them before placing rocks one after another—more bold this time.

And he *felt* something. Didn't he? A Connection to the land itself? It felt silly to try to express it, but something pulled on him. Tugging directly on his emotions; as he worked, he tugged back.

Something peeked out of the ground nearby. It vanished as he glanced toward it, but Yumi gasped, then clasped her hands before her, grinning like a maniac. She waved for him to continue, then apparently remembered her duty as a coach and encouraged him to breathe. To be calm.

That wasn't so easy, as the crowd was beginning to get louder, people murmuring and chattering. Painter launched into his eighth stack—remarkably without any of the others having fallen. He could *almost* visualize this one before he placed the stones. He'd make it the tallest of them all. He had the rocks, and knew how they'd fit together. He could make his tower appear to lean, but really be sturdy because of the weight of this rock here…

He felt that tugging again.

It was actually working.

It was all *real*.

An ethereal ball of light seeped up from the ground near the fence, roughly halfway between him and the machine. It glowed like a large glob of liquid metal, softly shimmering with the colors of hion.

Painter placed another rock, struggling to remain calm. The spirit lingered, then turned as if looking toward the clanking machine—though the spirit had no eyes. Part of it stretched in that direction, then

the rest followed, like elastic snapping together. As the parts melded, it soared along the stone ground like it was swimming. It passed among the startled people who, their attention on the machine, hadn't noticed it first appearing.

It swam right up to the scholars.

"No!" Yumi cried, standing. "No, they *stole* it from us!"

Painter turned, letting his current rock slip. The tower toppled, destabilizing one of the others, which collapsed as well. Outside the fence, the townspeople cheered as one of the scholars picked up the glowing spirit, then raised it in his hands. People crowded around, cutting off Painter's view of what happened next.

"And now!" The man's voice drifted to where Painter slouched on the ground, barely noticing the heat from below. "See how we can make this spirit transform into a useful object via the pictures we present as simple inputs. Behold! It is done!"

"That took all day!" a voice shouted. Liyun? "Your machine will never replace the yoki-hijo. A competent girl can draw a half dozen spirits in a day! A master can sometimes get *dozens*!"

"And how many yoki-hijo are there?" the scholar shouted back. "Sixteen at most! We currently have only fourteen. How long did the people of this town wait between visits of the yoki-hijo? Months? Years? *These* machines can be placed in every town and village, working all day."

Liyun didn't reply.

"You will see!" the scholar said. "We'll remain here calling spirits until every need of every resident is filled."

Painter—exhausted, his fingers raw even inside his gloves—turned to Yumi.

"You did well," she told him.

"Not well enough. Yumi, I don't think I drew that spirit. I think the machine did."

"No," she said, firm. Then she hesitated and spoke a little less certainly. "It was maybe both of you. Spirits always come up right next to me when I'm performing, while that one was between you and the scholars."

"So the machine works," Painter said. "It drew the spirit."

"What you did worked as well, Painter," she said, kneeling beside him. "It was already obvious the machine works. They wouldn't have brought it here if it weren't capable of attracting a spirit. But its stacks are mediocre, barely viable. You can beat it, Painter, do better than it can. Get a spirit for us to talk to, to question."

He looked around at the many rocks. "More practice?" he said with a sigh.

She nodded.

In response, he took a drink from the canteen Hwanji brought him, shook the stiffness out of his hands, then got back to it. Though he didn't draw another spirit that day—and he knew it had been months between the first time Yumi had done it and her second—at least it was a nibble at success.

He hoped that would sustain him for however long it took to find his next taste.

Chapter 25

A WEEK LATER, Yumi watched the most shocking thing she'd ever seen. Two people kissing. In *front* of her. In front of everyone, on the *viewer*. A man made from the blue hion lines, and a woman from the magenta.

Locking lips, intimate. Right *there*.

She gasped and pulled her blankets closer, up to her chin. "Can they *show* that?" she asked.

Painter just chuckled.

She threw a pillow at him in response—it didn't even disrupt his spirit, but it made her feel better. Then she leaned forward, eyes wide.

It had become her habit, after practicing her painting for several hours, to stop and watch a drama. It felt like a frivolous waste of time, but Painter said that it was important to relax now and then—and it *was* his world. His rules. She was basically *forced* to do this.

Besides, the story continued each night—and she *needed* to see what happened. She followed three separate dramas, but *Seasons of Regret* was the best. And the most scandalous. She cocked her head as the kiss continued. And continued. And…

"How do they breathe?" she asked.

"In a kiss like that," he said, "you share breath. You send the air back and forth, exhaling into each other's lungs. It can keep you going for a good fifteen minutes."

She believed it for the briefest moment, then saw his smirk. That earned him another pillow, this one straight through the head.

On the viewer, Sir Ashinata and Lady Hinobi broke apart. This was a "historical" drama, according to Painter. Which meant they were pretending to be from another time, before things like

showers. Yumi sighed at how the two stared at each other, with the viewer showing their faces up close, tiny hion lines reproducing even their eyelashes.

That look. Could they really be faking? Painter must be wrong—these two actors must actually be in love. Because of that look. She had been *waiting* to see them look at each other like that for a week now.

Sir Ashinata was some kind of wandering warrior, and their pairing was forbidden. But they had finally admitted their love. It was *wonderful*.

"Now," Sir Ashinata said, "I must go away. Forever."

"What?" Yumi cried. "*What?*"

He spun and walked off, one hand on his hion blade. Lady Hinobi turned from him to hide the tears in her eyes.

"No," Yumi said, leaping to her feet. "*No!*"

But the ending music started playing. The hour was over. He was *leaving*?

"That's terrible!" she said, pointing. "We waited all this time, and now he's just *going away*?"

"He's ronin," Painter said. "That is the way of his kind."

Yumi glared at him, but…well, he turned away, wiping a tear from his eye. He didn't like it any more than she did. And Painter wasn't to blame for what the people who made the drama had done.

She collapsed into a heap of blankets and pillows on the futon. She'd discovered at last that it wasn't an altar. Painter had chuckled for a day after she'd finally thought to ask.

"But…" she said. "But why?"

"Some stories end this way." Painter stood up and stretched. "Depends on what the writer wants. It's good that they're all a little different. You don't want them all to be happy."

"Yes. I. *Do*." Her voice grew softer. "They could create anything. Make anything. Why would they make something *sad*?"

"I've heard people find it more realistic."

"Is it?" Yumi asked, pulling her blankets tighter. "Is sadness realistic?" That felt more depressing than the ending itself.

"I used to think so," Painter said. "And Yumi, many things in life are sad. So it's realistic at least to some experiences. It's good that some stories are happy, some are sad. That part *is* realistic."

She shook her head and dried her tears in the blanket.

"Sometimes," Painter said, "the more you think about it, the better an ending like this seems. It can be right, even if it's painful."

"There's still hope," Yumi said, fierce. "The program isn't finished. Something might happen tomorrow."

"I don't know," Painter said. "That was the end of the arc—you can see it in the extra-long credits. Tomorrow they'll switch to a different set of characters."

"No," she said. "It's not over. You'll see…"

She said it with more confidence than she felt. Ten hours awake in each body made for an odd schedule in some ways, but at least she could catch a drama each day. This one could turn out to be happy.

Couldn't it?

Painter walked to the viewer to turn it off—he liked experimenting with what he could accomplish while a spirit. Yumi trailed over to the window to look out at the pure black sky. With its single point of light, distant as last night's dreams.

(Unfortunately, you're not going to get an answer for why "the star" could pierce the shroud when

the sun and stars could not. I don't yet know. I have some answers about the shroud itself, and the nature of what was happening to Yumi's and Painter's lands. I'll give you those when it's appropriate.

But the way that one planet could filter through the darkness and reach longing eyes in Kilahito? No idea what was going on. I'm sorry to leave you with this mystery, but think of it as—instead of a hole—a promise for future stories yet undiscovered.)

"Want to get back to training?" Painter said, gesturing to the stacks of paper.

"No," she said, turning away from the window and putting aside silly thoughts about a silly drama, even if her eyes were still wet. "I think it's time for me to go out. Hunting nightmares."

"You're not ready."

"You've said this is all I need to learn," she said, waving to the stacks of painted bamboo. "You said I mastered it a *week* ago, Painter. You've been having me do nothing more than bamboo for days and days and days now!"

"Knowing how to paint," he said, "is different from being able to do it in a stressful situation. That requires reflex and instinct. Like hitting a ball."

"A ball?" she asked, picking up the small bowl of soup she'd forgotten as the ending of the drama arrived. She frowned as she sat down on the futon. "What ball?"

"You know," he said, making a motion with his hand—as if that explained it. "Hitting a ball? With a snap-racket? You…don't have that on your world."

"Obviously," she said, tasting her noodles.

Hey! They *almost* weren't terrible.

"Try this," she said, eager, holding the bowl toward him, pinching the spoon between two fingers and proffering it. He plucked the spirit of the spoon and was able to get a taste of the soul of the soup.

He looked up at her.

"It's only my second week cooking," she said.

"There is more salt in this soup than there is soup, Yumi," he said.

"It said to salt liberally," she said. "I didn't know what that meant."

"You could ask."

It was…difficult to remember she could ask for things. Beyond that, cooking for herself was a strange experience.

"Well," she said, holding up the bowl, "I consider this a success. It's quite nearly edible." She went to the sink and ceremoniously dumped it out. "But for all my weakness at cooking, Painter, I'm *certainly* better at painting. It's time. We should go out tonight and look for that nightmare."

He walked over. "You don't even believe this is the reason we're linked. You think it's that machine and the scholars."

"Yes," she admitted. By now they'd seen that it could legitimately draw its own spirits, without help from a yoki-hijo. It merely did so very slowly, at a rate of one or so a day. "But what if I'm wrong?"

He met her eyes.

"I don't understand any of this," she said. "Painter, *you* said you thought that stable nightmare was the reason. So we need to pursue it. We need to try to find it."

He shoved his hands in his pockets to think, his brow creasing. Unfortunately they'd nearly run through his meager savings—and his suspension would soon be over. He'd need to immediately go back to work and prove himself to his superiors so that he didn't get into further trouble.

Therefore, either she needed to start doing his job, or they needed to solve this issue, ending their bond.

Did she want that?

Well, of course she did. She had duties—and more importantly, the spirits had called her to a special task. She needed to see that through to help them. Then she had to return to her life. Improved, yes.

But still irrevocably alone.

She didn't want to confront that. At least…at least there was that flying ship from his planet, traveling between their worlds. That meant something. For the future.

"All right," he said, standing up. "Let's pack the painting supplies."

She nodded firmly. Today she'd dressed in sturdy work clothing. For *working*. Something she'd never truly done, but it felt right. Leggings under her dress, a thicker jacket than her lightweight one—short, not even down to her waist, but solid, with numerous metal clasps and buttons on it. Almost like armor.

"Something's off about this," Painter said, strolling over as she packed the painter's bag. "Yumi, that stable nightmare should have been spotted by now. It's been weeks. The Dreamwatch should've been sent for, should be working in the city. But if they were, it would be on the news. The Dreamwatch arriving is such a big deal…"

"Wait," Yumi said, pointing at him. "Have you been *stalling*? Is *that* why you made me practice again all this week? You thought maybe someone else would catch the thing?"

He shrugged. She didn't want to think of him as cowardly, but there *were* moments like this when he seemed perfectly willing to let someone else do the difficult jobs. Admittedly, she'd spent her entire life doing very little for herself. To an uncomfortable extreme. So she figured maybe she shouldn't point fingers.

She shoved the last of the large canvases into the bag, then nodded. It was time, at long last, for her to try being a nightmare painter.

PAINTER MADE THEM wait past the time when shift started, just in case. He said he wanted to minimize the chances of her being spotted by the other painters—although eventually that would very much be part of their plan. That said, it would probably be okay if she happened to be seen. Someone else would be patrolling his beat until his suspension was up. However, he said that the area was wide, and painters often moved between sections as they patrolled, chasing leads. As long as she didn't encounter any painters up close who could identify her as Nikaro's sister, they should be fine.

The plan was simple. They needed to hunt for signs of the stable nightmare, see if it was still prowling these streets. If it was, they'd draw the attention of one of the groups of painters patrolling nearby. Once they'd seen it, everyone could go to the foreman and corroborate what Yumi had told him. The Dreamwatch would be sent for.

It was a straightforward plan in concept, but each of the individual pieces daunted Yumi. She'd brought a device Painter said would make an emergency noise—it was a metal contraption with two round things on the sides that he said were bells. She'd seen bells though, and these weren't those. How was something shaped like a large biscuit a bell?

But she trusted it would work. Newer painters carried these to call for help. So she'd turn it on if they saw the stable nightmare. But what if no other painters were nearby? How would they get close enough to a nightmare to determine it was the right one, yet stay far enough away that it wouldn't attack her?

She voiced none of this to Painter. He was too nervous himself, evidenced by how he suggested—

no fewer than three times—that she return to the apartment. She resisted, though she'd never seen the streets so empty as she did tonight. Soon she crept out past the last line of buildings—built almost like a fortification, with windowless walls in a ring.

Here she *finally* got her first up-close look at the shroud: a shifting, seething wall of darkness. It was blacker than common night; night didn't swallow light. And night didn't feel like it was looking *back*. Her nerves failed her, and she didn't dare walk all the way up to the shroud. Instead she hovered near the last line of buildings, staring at it.

She hadn't expected it to *shift* like that. Turbulent. Undulating. Yet because of the lack of color, it was impossible to distinguish details. That gave it the appearance of something much farther away. An impossible visual.

"Do you ever get used to it?" she asked softly.

"You grow accustomed to it," he said. "Like a persistent noise. In the same way, you occasionally notice it anew—and suddenly it's alien again. Terrifying again. You have to get used to it all over. It's almost like making friends with someone who keeps changing personalities. One who stares at you in a way that makes you think they're eventually going to try to kill you…"

She ripped her gaze away from the shroud, instead looking along the buildings here. Whitewash covered the bricks of many portions—a plainly deliberate design choice, a wall of white to ward off the wall of darkness. And on many of those whitewashed portions were paintings. Large murals painted with the ink of a nightmare painter—monochromatic, but incredibly detailed in contrast and subtlety of shade.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Painters put them up when they feel like it," he said. "One section per painter."

"Where's yours?"

He shook his head. He didn't have one then? Perhaps no one would be impressed by another painting of bamboo.

They started their patrol, walking back from the shroud through the nearer rings of the city streets. Despite what she'd said earlier, he hadn't made her spend the last week *only* on bamboo. They'd talked about patrolling and about protocol for painters. So she understood what it was he did at night—how he watched for nightmare signs.

He still spotted the first sign before she did. "There," he said, pointing ahead. To the corner of a wall by the street, about five feet up in the air. A smoking black spot marked the bricks there.

That high? She'd been watching the ground. They approached to find black smoke steaming off what appeared to be black tar—a piece of the shroud—covering a hand-size section of the corner. A sign that a nightmare had passed this way recently, brushing the building and leaving a trail.

"How did you spot that?" she hissed.

"Practice," he said, "and luck."

The less you have of the first, the more you need the second.

Though he'd taught her that the next step was to follow the trail, looking for other marks, he continued studying this one. Then he peered down the nearby alleyway.

"What?" she asked.

"This is a blatant mark," he said. "Right on the street, obvious and bigger than most. Feels like another painter should have spotted this. Yet I can see the next mark on that fire escape right inside the alley. No painter."

"So no one's noticed this yet," she said. "We're first. What's the problem?"

"No real problem," he said. "It's just that I had a horrifying thought. The foreman thinks I'm a

slacker."

"A what?"

"He thinks I haven't been doing my job for months now, starting long before you arrived. That's why he put me on suspension; me claiming I saw a stable nightmare was the final stroke in the painting he'd made of me in his head. Point is, he believes I've been slacking off, yet no one else ever reported any problems with this region…" He looked to Yumi, perhaps seeing her confusion.

"I'm worried," Painter explained, "that the foreman *didn't* replace me on this beat after suspending me. We've been short-staffed, and from his perspective, this beat is a quiet one. I'm worried he assumed other painters were covering the region, or that it's a section nightmares don't often visit, which allowed me to supposedly goof off instead of doing my job."

"And if he *didn't* assign a replacement…"

"That would explain why the stable nightmare was never spotted," Painter said. "Why it could spend weeks prowling the city and never be caught. Most nightmare painters patrol and watch for signs only near the rim of the city, because nightmares have to pass through there to get farther inward. If this nightmare always entered through my section of the perimeter, it could move through the entire city unchallenged."

A disturbing thought indeed. He waved her along with him into the alley, though she couldn't see the second sign he'd spotted. As they walked, she whispered to him carefully, "Painter? Why is it that the foreman assumed you haven't been doing your job? Why is everyone so ready to assume you were lying?"

Painter glanced down. And her instinct was to reprimand him, to *insist* that he explain himself *immediately*. His reaction was an obvious sign of guilt.

Yet had that ever worked on him as well as it had on her, when Liyun had treated her that way?

Had it ever *truly* worked on her? Demands, guilt, verbal punishment? She remembered days of exhaustion when all she'd wanted was a kind word, a teardrop's worth of empathy.

Choice. She had a *choice*.

You don't have to be like her, Yumi thought. *You really don't.*

Such a novel idea, and so much harder to do than she would ever have assumed. Still, Yumi forced out the words. The ones akin to those she always wished she could have heard.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I know you're trying. That's what matters."

Pay attention. At times, *this* is what heroism looks like.

Painter glanced at her, then let out a long breath. "Thanks," he whispered. "But you're right about me. It's hard sometimes, you know? Keeping on doing the same thing every day, feeling like you're getting nowhere?"

He pointed at a fire escape—a metal lattice that ran up alongside a building. She squinted, and barely made out a trail of smoke coming off one of the metal corners on the second story. They started upward.

"In school," he whispered to her, "the teachers always talked about the *importance* of our job. They'd preach about the meaning of art, about theory. They said painting was about passion and the whims of creativity. They teach us we're supposed to see the *shape* of the nightmare, and paint that.

"Then you get into the real world, and find that it's hard to be creative like that every moment. You realize they didn't teach you important things, like how to work when you *don't* feel passion, or when the whims of creativity aren't striking you. What then? What good is theory when you need to feed yourself?

"In the real world, you realize you can do your job by making the same thing again and again.

Bamboo captures nightmares just fine. Whatever they say. All of those high-minded aspirations from school fade before the truth, Yumi, that sometimes…it's just a job."

They stopped on the landing. She said nothing, though it was hard for her. Merely nodded for him to continue.

"So I got into a bit of a rut," he said. "Yeah, guess I can say it. I only did bamboo, day in and day out. Foreman Sukishi didn't like that. He never liked me. I wasn't…well regarded in school, as I told you. So he's thought the worst of me. And he always assumed I was doing bamboo because I wasn't actually finding nightmares."

They reached the second story of the fire escape, near the sign of the nightmare. And as he looked toward her again, Yumi realized that she understood. She'd made different choices, putting perhaps *too much* of herself into her work instead of backing off like he had. Still, she could legitimately see how doing as he had wasn't laziness; it was something more personal, and far more relatable.

"It's really hard to be a great painter," he whispered as they knelt beside the nightmare sign. "But it's (lowly) easy to be a fine one. Regardless of what the foreman thinks though, I did my job—and I didn't let anyone get hurt. I would never allow that. I…I might not be some warrior, like you wanted. I'm not the person *anyone* wanted. But I'm trying."

She nodded to him and put her hand toward his shoulder for comfort, though she didn't dare touch him.

"Get a good look," Painter said, pointing to the smoke wafting from the corner where two small metal beams met. "The more of these you see, the easier it will be for you to pick out others when you're patrolling."

She leaned in close to inspect the metal—and the black coating. It looked like blood, in a way. Blood that evaporated.

"Why don't they leave trails on the ground?" she said. "Like footprints?"

"Once in a while you'll see a footprint," he said. "But not very often. We've never been able to figure it out."

Curious. It seemed likely the nightmare had left this sign when it had brushed the corner while walking up the steps. "Maybe it has to happen accidentally," she whispered. "Like when I went through that wall…"

Painter nodded, thoughtful. Then he pointed toward the top of the lattice, where another wisp of smoke was clinging to a bar near a window, all of it highlighted by the reflections of hion lines close above.

"Painter," she whispered, "are they actually dangerous?"

"Of course they are."

"But if the stable one has been free for weeks…why hasn't it killed anyone?"

He didn't answer, just stared upward at that window.

"Maybe what you know is wrong," she said. "I thought I understood my life, but it turns out I've been profoundly lied to. Is it possible the same is true for you?"

"No. I've seen pictures of cities destroyed by these things."

"How could one creature, even a nightmare, destroy a city?"

"They're hard to stop when stable," he said. "And they call to others. One reaches stability, and then others follow." He paused. "We think."

"You think?"

"The most recent city this happened to was decades ago, and the few survivors couldn't explain much. Dozens of nightmares rampaging." He looked at her. "But I promise they're dangerous. I've

personally seen a child bleed after being attacked by one of these things. Maybe I don't have all the answers, maybe there are holes in our understanding, but I know they're a threat."

She nodded to him, took a deep breath, and started to climb up to see what was in that window.

Painter, however, waved for her to halt. "My turn to be the ghost," he said. "Have the bell ready in case. It's wound—all you need to do is flip the switch, and the ringing should carry far enough to reach the nearby sections."

She wanted to argue, but his point was valid. She shouldn't risk herself if he could potentially sneak up on the nightmare unseen. He'd let her know if they'd found the stable one, or if they needed to keep searching.

Painter moved silently up the last two stories, then peered in through a window at the top. Yumi waited, anxious, clutching the bell in one hand and the strap of her large canvas bag in the other—barely conscious that by pulling it tight like that, it was cutting into her shoulder. She didn't dare think, and instead focused on her breathing, in and out.

In and out. In and out.

Painter returned, shaking his head. "There's a nightmare in there, but it's not ours. We can move on."

He started down the steps, but Yumi remained in place, looking up. "What happens," she whispered, "if we don't stop it?"

"It could become stable," Painter admitted, halfway to the next level. "It takes many visits."

"You've been off your patrol," Yumi said, "for over two weeks now." Twenty-seven days. "And there might not be a replacement doing your job. What good does it do for us to hunt this stable nightmare if we just allow a host of others to feed and become real, step by step, while we do nothing?"

"This nightmare might stray into other regions on future nights. It will eventually get caught."

"And if it doesn't? I could stop it now."

"Too dangerous," he said.

"How? If it's not stable, it can't hurt me. Right?"

He stopped next to her. "They feed on people, Yumi. Our dreams, yes. Also on our thoughts, our minds. Besides, it's possible it has some stability. You can't always tell by its appearance."

She met his eyes, then started climbing the steps. She had trained for weeks. If not for this, then why?

Painter groaned behind her, then followed her up. She crept to the window, steeled herself, then looked in. An elderly woman lay on a bed there, frail. The light shining in through the window formed a square that framed her body, the shadow at its edge falling across her face. The voluminous bed seemed to have swallowed her.

The nightmare perched on the headboard. Yumi's breath caught. She'd imagined something humanlike. A shadow of a person. This was more arachnoid, with legs made of twisting smoke that clawed down around the old woman like a cage. It was (lowly) big. Large as the largest of the great hawks that hunted the skies. With those leglike tendrils stretched out fully, it would easily be fifteen feet across.

Yumi froze, a powerful anxiety seizing her in its grip. She wanted to bolt, to scramble down the steps, to run until her strength gave out. But she couldn't move.

Something buried deep inside her recognized that monstrous figure. And that piece of her was *terrified*. A primal instinct told her that you *did not mess* with a creature that saw humans as prey.

"Right," Painter whispered. "Carefully remove your supplies and think calm thoughts, like I told

you. It will focus on its victim, assuming you don't get too afraid."

"How do I—"

"Meditate, Yumi. And get your supplies out."

You couldn't meditate *and* pull out supplies. That wasn't the way it worked, at least not for her.

She remained still and tried breathing exercises. That seemed to help.

"As long as you don't make sudden motions or speak too loudly," Painter said, "it won't be drawn to you. With luck, you can get the painting going without it ever disengaging its victim. You can banish it quietly, and that poor woman doesn't even need to know what happened."

Yumi didn't move.

"Yumi?" Painter said. Then a little louder, "*Yumi*."

The nightmare shifted, then turned what *might* have been a head in their direction, with a face that dripped liquid darkness toward the ground. There were no eyes…

Or were those tiny white spots eyes? Like pinpricks swirling scratchily into infinity. The thing quested out with four of its many legs, stretching them across the room toward the window.

It had *seen* them.

No…it had *heard* Painter.

"Wait," Painter said, backing up. "Wait, it's pointing toward *me*. Did it (lowly) see me?"

Yumi finally found her strength. She looked down, frantic, and dug into her bag for the jar of ink. With trembling fingers, she tried to unscrew the lid—but found it fastened tight, as if bolted in place.

"You can *hear* me?" Painter said louder, stepping forward.

The nightmare paused and withdrew its legs. Then it balanced its bulky body in an impossible posture on only two of them as all the rest stretched again toward the window—slowly, carefully elongating—as if the night itself were reaching to swallow Painter.

"You do see me," Painter said. "I guess if Design can do it, it's not so surprising that…" His voice drifted off, then he made a strained sound, prompting Yumi to look.

To find him beginning to disintegrate.

Painter had gone rigid, his eyes wide, as parts of him became smoky and indistinct—his form *fuzzing* toward the nightmare. His essence twisted, coalescing into twin vortices of smoke like miniature tornadoes. One blue. One magenta.

Hion. His *soul* was becoming hion. And the nightmare—spreading its many legs around the window and drawing its center bulk toward Painter, pinprick white eyes facing his direction—was *feeding* on that energy.

Yumi screamed.

He'd told her not to do that. Some weaker nightmares did react to sudden sounds, but a painter's job wasn't merely to frighten them away—it was to deal with them so they didn't assault someone else. Still, a loud noise could disorient and frighten off a nightmare, and was a last resort for a painter who was out of supplies or otherwise indisposed. Not that this was her line of thinking.

Her line of thinking amounted to: "*AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!*"

There are things a classroom can't teach. For those, you need a good scoop of field experience plopped right on your plate, glistening like grease. Everyone at least *feels* like screaming their first time.

In this case, the nightmare drew back, its legs curling in. Then it darted away, fleeing through the opposite wall—leaving Painter to shake himself, his form snapping into place.

"That," he said (lowly), "was unexpected. It could feed on me like it does a sleeping person."

"How can you be so calm!" Yumi said, frantic.

"I'm probably just numb," he said. "Thank you for frightening it off."

"P-painter?" a voice said from within the room. The elderly woman had sat up and seemed disoriented.

"Tell her you're simply checking on her," Painter advised. "And you got startled by something. Nobody wants to *know* they've been fed on. It…is better this way."

Feeling overwhelmed, Yumi did as he suggested. Then, blushing deeply, she grabbed at her bag. Her body was still electric, pumped full of every frenzied cocktail it could make. She felt like she should be doing something, even if it was more screaming.

Fortunately, Painter was calm, as if the incident was over. He wasn't looking in the room. What if the thing returned?

Yumi's shameful failure made her want to scrunch up and vanish. Had she really been thinking of *him* as a coward earlier?

"That could have gone worse," he said.

"What?" she said, shocked.

"Everyone has trouble their first few times," he said, turning to her and smiling. "Don't fret. I couldn't sleep for days after my first field encounter—and I was shadowing two experienced painters. I think you did fine."

"I did *nothing*."

"Which is better than running," he said, then frowned. "Though I suppose *that* is going to be a problem…"

It took her a moment to realize what he was indicating. He'd moved to the railing and was pointing below. Two figures had entered the alleyway, worried, to check on the scream they'd heard.

Akane and Tojin.

PAINTER TRIED TO calculate whether there was a way to escape without Yumi being seen—but it was too late. Tojin was already pointing, and Akane called up. Yumi, looking sheepish, stepped to the railing of the fire escape landing.

Yeah, he'd worried about being seen by the wrong painters. He'd hoped that Tojin and Akane would find Yumi only *after* she had accomplished their goal and proven the existence of the stable nightmare. How would he explain any of this?

Akane came scrambling up the steps, Tojin in tow. "Yumi?" she demanded, taking in the painter's bag Yumi was holding. "What are you…" Akane trailed off as she saw the old woman through the window. "Sorry!" she said. "Um, merely some routine training of a new recruit! Please pay us no mind." Akane seized Yumi by the arm and towed her down the steps, past a befuddled Tojin.

Seriously, where did they find clothes that fit him? Did they just stitch two regular shirts together? Painter sighed, following the group. Yumi looked back at him, her eyes wide, panicked. He shrugged, as he had no idea what to say. Worse, his head was starting to pound from that encounter. Who knew that a ghost could get a headache?

"What (lowly) are you *doing*?" Akane repeated at Yumi as they reached the street. "You haven't been to training! You aren't authorized to be out here!"

Yumi looked at the ground.

"She's trying to cover for him," Tojin said. "Nikaro is on 'personal leave.' I'll bet he's been goofing off, not doing his rounds. It's like…before, Akane." He walked over and met Yumi's eyes, giving her an encouraging smile. "You're trying to help out. Do your brother's job, eh? Because you know it needs to be done, even if he's too much a coward to do it himself?"

"Oh, *Yumi*," Akane said, one hand to her forehead. "That's sweet of you to try, but girl, you *can't* just go out and cover a painter's shift. It's not like Nikaro works at an assembly line."

"Painter's not a coward," Yumi said softly. She looked up. "And I'm not completely without training. He showed me a few things."

Painter stifled a groan. She probably thought that would help, but it wouldn't. They'd think him reckless for teaching her anything. And maybe he was.

Akane locked arms with Yumi and towed her away, more by force of personality than force of arm. "Tojin," she said, "see if Ito and his team can cover for us tonight. I think we need to stage an intervention."

"Sure thing," Tojin said, jogging off.

Painter trailed behind the two of them as Akane steered Yumi—who was visibly shaken—toward the old familiar noodle house. And…Painter was surprised by how much at peace he felt with what was coming. He'd been dreading it, deep down. The truth had been burning at him like a fire that refused to go out no matter how much water he dumped on it.

Yumi was going to find out what happened to him in school. And…well, the fact that it was coming was actually a *relief*.

As they walked, Yumi choked out the story of what she'd seen. Which was good. It meant that Akane would double-check on that elderly woman—probably post a watcher from among the swing-shift painters—to make sure that when the thing inevitably returned, it would get painted out of existence.

The sole loser tonight was Painter. And…well, he'd really lost months ago, if not years ago. As they reached the noodle house, he realized that any hope he'd had of impressing Akane or reconciling with the others was long dead and gone. They thought that in his laziness, he'd sent his little sister to go out untrained and potentially get herself hurt.

It was over. He didn't have to worry about his former friends anymore. There was a freedom in watching that door shut, entirely, forever.

Sure, it *hurt*. Like acupuncture gone wrong, all over his body, spiking him through the nerves and into his heart.

At least it was over. At least he knew.

Akane got Yumi seated and ordered her some warm broth to sip. The others arrived soon after. Tojin with arms exposed. Izzy in white and Masaka in black. They settled around Yumi in their usual places, and Painter took a seat at a nearby unoccupied table, gazing at Yumi as she came out of her shell. Food, warmth, and friendship soon soothed away the nerves of her first nightmare encounter. The others knew what that felt like. It was why they'd been willing to trade shifts to come talk to her.

He glanced at Design as she emerged from the kitchen, then returned to watching Yumi. She had such a reserved smile. Sure, there was something to be said for a smile that was given away freely—but he preferred Yumi's. Revealed only when truly earned, her smile had a unique value. A currency backed by the irresistible power of her soul.

Design sauntered up to him, then huffed. "I'm supposed to act jealous," she said, "that you barely look at me anymore. Maybe these curves are faulty. The math could be off. Is that a thing that happens with mortals?"

"You're as perfect as ever, Design," he said. "I'm just having an…unusual few weeks."

She settled in a chair beside his. "I'm not truly jealous," she noted. "I'm kind of a god, to some people at least. Envy would be unbefitting of me. But when he gave me this form, Hoid said I was supposed to watch how humans interacted. How they paired off."

"Why give you *that* instruction?" Painter asked.

"I have some wildly inaccurate ideas about the ways humans form bonds," she said. "It's endearing and amusing."

He looked at her; she grinned back. And he wondered: was she actually some bizarre inhuman thing like she claimed? He would have scoffed at the idea, except for…well, everything lately.

Design nodded toward Yumi. "Why do you like her?"

"I don't. We're forced to work together."

"Nikaro. Do you want to try that again, and make it sound persuasive or something? Because I've only had eyes for a few years, and even *I* can see straight through you."

He leaned down, crossing his arms on the table and resting his head on them. He didn't argue. What was the point?

"Can't you feel it?" he whispered.

"What?"

"The *heat*," he said. "It radiates from Yumi, like from the sun on her world."

Design looked closely at him, narrowing her eyes. "Are you all right? She's not on fire. You might be hallucinating."

"It's a metaphor, Design," he said. "Yumi's *warm* because she's *intense*. She has given everything she has to become the best at what she does. Stacking rocks, an activity so bizarre it makes her *more* fascinating. Because there's nobody else like her."

"Wait," Design said. "Weren't you complaining the other day, down here, about how intense she is?"

"Yeah." He smiled.

"You can't like it and hate it all at once."

"Your friend is right," he said. "You do have some inaccurate ideas about mortals."

"It's endearing and amusing."

He basked in that heat one last time. "I love that Yumi understands. She's been there. She's one of the only people I've met who knows how it feels to give yourself to art…"

"That sounds like a terrible reason for liking someone," Design said.

"It's the way we humans do things."

"A stupid way," Design said.

"How would you do it?"

"With a formula," she said. "Find complementary sets of attributes that fit into a proper matrix."

He shook his head, smiling. "I wish there were a formula, Design. If there were, I could fix this."

She cocked her head. "…This?"

He nodded toward the table, to where Akane had put her arm around Yumi's shoulders. "Yumi, dear," Akane said, "we need to have a talk about your brother. And the things he's done."

"We know you look up to him," Tojin said. "We don't want to interfere…"

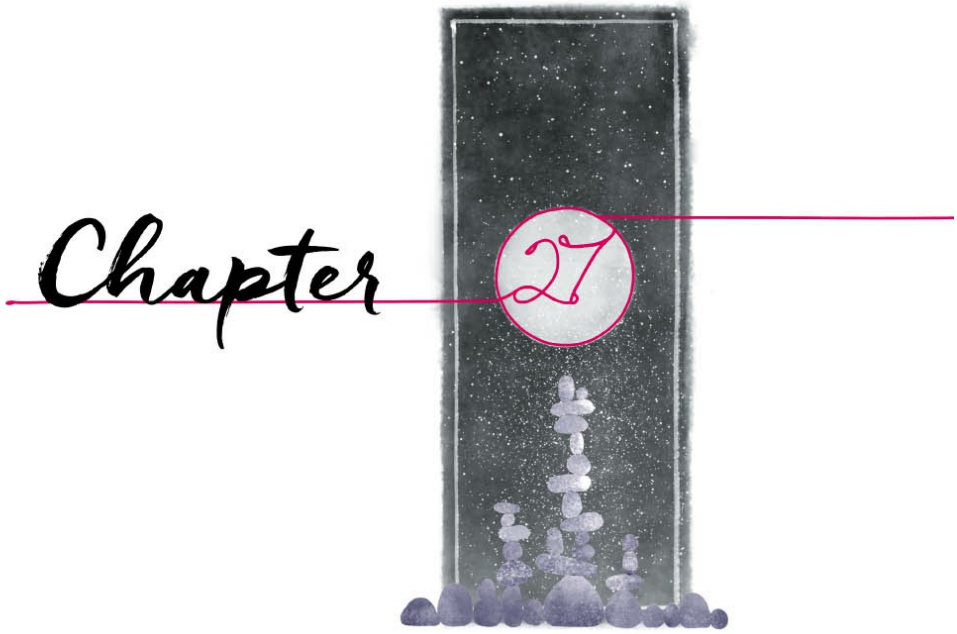
"I do," Izzy said. "I *absolutely* want to interfere. You have to know. Your brother is a liar."

Painter stood up, feeling strange that the motion didn't push back the chair—he instead simply passed through it. He gave Design a smile.

It had been nice, these last few days. But he would find it liberating to be done. To know the door was closed. Not only with his old friends. But with Yumi.

That's a lie, the honest part of him thought. *This is ripping you apart.*

No more than he deserved though. He trailed off, enjoying the extended leash Design had given him, and went wandering through the night.



"I...KNOW HE sometimes tells untruths," Yumi said to the group. "I've heard him speak them. I think they're mostly just to avoid hurting people's feelings. He's more reliable than he seems."

The others shared glances. Yumi didn't know what to make of their behavior. Tojin wouldn't meet her eyes, looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here. Akane kept her arm on Yumi's shoulders, as if to give her support.

It was Izzy who started explaining first. Yumi had mostly taken the yellow-haired woman for frivolous, but now her voice was dead serious.

"Yumi," she said, "do you know what the Dreamwatch are?"

"Sure," Yumi replied. "They deal with stable nightmares."

"They're the elite painters," Tojin said, hands clasped tightly before him, as if he were trying to squeeze juice from the air. "The best of the best. The finest artists; the most respected of our kind. Every painter dreams of joining them."

"They're the actual warriors," Akane said. "The rest of us, we're like…the house dress you wear at home, while they're the ball gown. Understand?"

"That makes no sense," Masaka said.

"I understand," Yumi said. "But why does this matter?"

"Your brother," Izzy said. "He wanted to be in the Dreamwatch. Badly. Too badly."

Yumi cocked her head.

"He lied," Izzy said. "Back in school, he told us he'd gotten in. Tryouts were a year into our two years of training. He told us he'd been selected—and he managed to convince our professors somehow, although they should have known who got in and who didn't. Nikaro left class half the day

to ‘train’ with the Dreamwatch.”

“We were going to be his crew,” Tojin said softly. “Each member of the Dreamwatch gets a team, called companions. Nikaro promised us that we’d be his. It…would have changed a lot. Not just money. But…I mean, I told my family.”

“We all did,” Akane said, squeezing Yumi’s shoulder.

“I’m extremely confused,” Yumi confessed.

“One year into our training,” Izzy said, “Painter tried out for the Dreamwatch and told us he’d been accepted. He spent the entire next year *pretending* to go train with them, giving us promises, making us hope. Then…at the end of the year…”

“We found out,” Masaka whispered, “that he’d been lying the entire time. He *hadn’t* been going to special classes. He’d been going to the library and just…sitting there. Not even reading or studying. Just sitting. Staring at the wall.”

“A whole *year*,” Tojin said, wringing his hands.

“That (lowly) man,” Izzy said, punching the chair with a clenched fist. “Sitting in the *library*. He shouldn’t have graduated at all. Unfortunately, they needed painters, and he was capable.”

“A capable *liar* at least,” Tojin said. “Should have sent him to the law school after an extended con like that.”

Yumi felt her stomach wrench. She…thought she was following this. But it didn’t make sense. “Why would he just sit there? Maybe he made it into the Dreamwatch, but then washed out at the end?”

“Nope!” Izzy said. “He didn’t get accepted at all. He lied to us for an entire year.”

“Broke our hearts,” Tojin said softly. “We found him there in the library, after finally getting smart and realizing he’d never introduced us to any of the other Dreamwatch recruits. We confirmed it with the administration. He never. Got. *In*.”

Yumi looked up and met each of their eyes in turn, except Tojin’s—he was staring at the table, seeming concurrently angry and embarrassed.

“I was going to be famous,” Izzy said.

“It’s not even that,” Akane said. “It’s that… Yumi, it’s hard to explain how it felt. After all that time. To find out…”

“I can understand what it’s like,” Yumi said, “to uncover profound, extended deception by someone you love. I’m so sorry he caused you that agony.”

“Nikaro is unreliable, Yumi,” Akane said softly. “He’s done his job this last year since graduation, but…well, you need to know. This story he tells about the stable nightmare? It’s just a way to make himself look important.”

“What if it’s not, though?” Yumi asked.

What if it was?

She…had no proof he’d ever seen such a thing.

“It’s *absolutely* a lie,” Izzy said. At her side, Masaka nodded firmly. “If he’d really seen a stable nightmare, it would have attacked by now. They don’t skulk and hide once they’ve formed. They start murdering.”

“It’s proof,” Tojin said. “He said he saw one…what? Two weeks ago?”

“Twenty-seven days,” Yumi whispered.

“Right,” Tojin said, with a nod. “Over two weeks. It would have attacked by now.”

“He goes out at night, doesn’t he?” Izzy said. “He tells you that he’s hunting it, right? He encouraged you to take his patrol because he was *so busy* tracking a super dangerous nightmare?

Well, I promise you. He's going to some café somewhere. Staring at the wall. Letting you *dream* while he just *sits there*."

The table fell silent. Yumi could practically *feel* their sense of betrayal. Their frustration, anger. Even hatred? And who could blame them?

She wanted to defend him. She couldn't find the words. They were ephemeral, like a prayer she had heard only once.

"What I don't get," she eventually said, "is why you thought he would even make it into this Dreamwatch. You said they only take the best artists, right?"

"The best of the best," Masaka whispered.

"So why would you think they'd take Nikaro?" Yumi said. "I mean, he's capable, but…surely the Dreamwatch wants someone who can do something more than paint bamboo or the occasional face from a few quick lines."

The others frowned, and Akane pulled back, looking at Yumi with a frown.

"Huh," Izzy said. "I assumed his family would know. Something else he lied about, I guess."

"What?" Yumi said.

"Yumi," Akane replied, "Nikaro is the single *most talented* artist I've ever met. He's amazing."

"The rest of us," Tojin said, "we came to painter school on a whim. We showed some aptitude, took a class or two, and got selected. Nikaro? He'd dedicated his *life* to getting into that school—to doing this job. He showed us things he'd done as a child. He'd been painting from the day he could hold a brush."

"I believed him," Akane said. "After seeing what he could do…I absolutely believed, and still do. He said he'd given everything, every day of his life, to learning how to paint so he could join the Dreamwatch. That's why we believed him. When we met him, it seemed inevitable he'd get in."

"The Dreamwatch must have seen something we didn't," Tojin said. "Still seems strange they rejected him. But who knows. Maybe he didn't even go to the audition? Wouldn't be the biggest lie he's told."

"Yeah," Izzy said, "or maybe they can just smell a liar. The Dreamwatch are about protecting people's dreams—not crushing them. Nikaro would eventually have wandered off and let someone get eaten by a nightmare because he found a neat wall to stare at."

Yumi took it all in, feeling overwhelmed. A stack of stones gone way too high, and teetering with every shift in the breeze. "Excuse me," she said. "I…need some time."

She fled, and they let her. Minutes later, she tore into Painter's apartment and rushed to the trunk at the foot of his futon. She tossed aside the supplies and pulled out the portfolio at the bottom. She'd promised not to open it. But what was a promise made to someone like him?

She ripped it open.

And found wonder inside.

Gorgeous paintings of startling skill. She gasped, putting a hand to her lips. Dozens and dozens of amazing pieces, incredible in their variety. Streets that seemed to come alive. People with glittering eyes, smiling from the page. Architecture that made her feel small. Then intricately detailed pictures of flowers that made her feel she was a giant.

He could somehow make the ink flow through a thousand different shades to give a *feeling* of color. An *impression* of liveliness. A *semblance* of motion. Frozen pieces of time, committed to the page, with even the distant people in the background conveying emotion with the slope of their posture and the shades of the light around them.

Here, buried at the bottom of a trunk, were *masterpieces*.

"I knew it would go poorly," Painter's voice said from behind.

Yumi jumped, spinning to find him standing in the doorway. She blushed, caught right in the act, but he didn't say anything about her violation of his privacy. He merely leaned against the frame of the open door, his eyes distant.

"I was going to go walk the city tonight," he said, "but then I realized where you'd come. So I thought it best to just get it over with, you know?"

"I…" What did she say? She didn't know how to ask someone to pass the salt. She couldn't handle *this*.

"I knew it would go poorly with the others," he repeated. "That it would blow up on me, back in school? I knew. I recognized the anger they'd feel when they found out. How my lies would ruin and break everything. I knew. Over the months, I've wondered: Is it better? Better that I *understood* what I was doing? Or would it have been better if I'd somehow done it by accident?"

"Why?" Yumi finally whispered. "Why didn't you just *tell* them that you didn't get accepted to the Dreamwatch?"

"Why, why, why…" He slumped against the doorframe. "I've asked that *every day*. Why didn't I just *say* something?" He looked away, out the window, his gaze vacant. "When we first met and they saw my art, it was the first time anyone had ever been *excited* by what I could do. My parents didn't want a painter. It's a low-class job. They hated that all I wanted was ink and a page…"

He shrugged. "I met Akane first; you know how she is. I soon had a whole group of friends, adopted right in. And they gushed over what I could do. They *cared* about it. We spent that entire first year planning. Talking about what we'd do in the Dreamwatch—me as the central soldier, them as my companions. Everything was pinned on me getting in."

He looked at her, his eyes glistening. "Then…I didn't make it. Not good enough. Poor style. Bad grasp of perspective. Even still, I can't see my flaws. I can't understand why. I'm so bad at art that I can't even *see* why I got rejected. It crushed me, Yumi. It *destroyed* me.

"I went to the others. I knew I needed to tell them. I *knew* it. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*! Everything would have been different if I'd simply *said it*. But I had just been ripped apart, and I saw the hope in their eyes, and I couldn't crush it. I couldn't do to them what had just been done to me. I…I *couldn't*."

"So you *lied* to them? Making it worse?"

"I know!" he said, throwing his hands into the air, standing up and stalking into the room. "I thought that I'd tell them the next day. The test happened to be on Akane's birthday. Why ruin the party with bad news, I thought. So I let them *assume* I'd passed. Didn't say it, but didn't really say anything.

"After that though, there were end-of-year tests, and I didn't want to distract everyone. Then…it just kind of continued. I believe…something was truly wrong with me back then. I moved through a haze those first few weeks, my hopes lying around me with slit throats, my emotions a cloud as dark as the shroud.

"I remember genuinely thinking that maybe I could simply keep it *going*. There was a desperate edge to those thoughts, a terror that I didn't want to confront. Couldn't confront? I wasn't thinking straight, Yumi. It wasn't normal, what I did. But I just *had* to keep it going. Watching it grow. A tumor. Not on my lungs or my throat. But on my soul."

He stepped over to her and knelt beside the portfolio. He methodically, gingerly, began taking the souls of the various pictures and packing them back in.

"What about these?" she said. "You don't paint like this anymore? Why not? You don't need to be in the Dreamwatch to do art."

"You know," he said softly, "they say true artists create, even if nobody is watching? They're *truly*

driven. I thought that was me. For years. Funny, eh? Me. I got to school and found an audience, then realized that it's so, *so* much more satisfying to create *for* someone.

"Shows how much of an artist I actually am. Akane and the others were my audience. I loved showing them the new pieces I made. I loved the joy, the delight, the…the praise too, I guess. But then I just…lost it all." He bowed his head, pausing as one of the souls of the pictures evaporated in his fingers. "I had friends for the first time. For a little while."

He gestured at the pictures then, pleading. So, reluctantly, she put them away.

"There's no point anymore," he said. "No point to *any* of it. No matter how much I pretend and tell myself I'm something important." He smiled at her. "I was willing to do it again to you. I jumped right into the lie. Willing to let you believe I was some hero, even though you'd inevitably find out. At least it only took you a couple weeks!"

She looked up to him, and her heart broke to see the tears on his cheeks. Phantom, ghostly tears. She reached up and hesitated right before touching him, then put a finger to the tear—wetting her finger.

He glanced away. “Well,” he said, wiping his eyes, “this is who those spirits stuck you with. I wonder what got into them. Shall we… I don’t know.” He sighed, then walked toward the door. “I’ll leave you alone. I can do *that* right, at least.”

“Painter,” she said. “*Nikaro*.”

He stopped near the door, shoulders slumping. He…expected a rebuke, she realized. The kind that would set even the stones ablaze. He deserved one, didn’t he? She’d been warned against lies, and this was a monumental one. The biggest she’d heard of—except the one told her by the very person who had taught her to never lie.

What a mess it all was. Emotions swirled in her, like quartz in a stone cut in half. Frustration at him on one side. Agony for him on the other.

She’d tasted friendship in the others. And she realized in that moment that she would lose them too. When this was all over. She’d never see Akane or Tojin again.

“Nikaro, look at me,” she said, standing up.

He turned around, and she stepped up to him, close. Dangerously close.

“Let’s go out,” she said softly.

“…Out?”

“Go out.” She waved her hand toward the window. “Let’s *do* something. Just us. Something that doesn’t involve nightmares, or spirits, or machines, or betrayals. Let’s just…just go. For one night.”

“You know what I am, Yumi,” he said. “What I’ve done. We have to confront that. Deal with it.”

“Do we?” she asked, her voice growing small. “Do we really *have to*?”

“Ignoring my problems is what got me into this situation.”

“What are we ignoring?” she said. “I heard what you said. I heard what they said. I know.” She met his eyes. “I *know*. We’ve confronted it. There. Done. Let’s go out.”

“But—”

“Maybe I don’t want to be responsible tonight! Maybe I don’t want to *have* to be the one who solves problems. Please?”

He held her eyes. Then he turned away, ashamed.

“We’re going,” she said anyway. She walked around him to the hallway, then held out her hand. “Come on. Tonight we’re not a painter or a yoki-hijo. Tonight we’re just people. I’ve wanted for *years* to visit the big city back home, and I was always denied. Will you deny me too, Nikaro? Would you break my heart like that?”

Finally, wonderfully, he stepped forward. “I could never,” he said softly. “I guess…there is that carnival running to celebrate the trip to the star.”

“Great. We’ll go there.”

“You don’t know what a carnival is.”

“Are you coming with me?”

He hesitated, then nodded.

“Then,” she said, “I don’t particularly care what it is.”

THERE IS SOMETHING universal about a carnival. You'll find them almost everywhere. On planets where the most advanced form of power is a hitch that can hold six horses. And on planets that are literally illuminated by free-flowing lines of light in the sky. Because carnivals don't need electricity, Investiture, or other forms of power. The *people* are the energy of a carnival.

Excitement bleeds. It flows like rivers. Ask any carnie, and they'll agree that there is a frantic *current* to a carnival. Yes, it's completely fabricated. So is the electricity that powers a light bulb. Being artificial doesn't mean it isn't real—it only means it has a purpose.

It's this power of excitement that carnivals tap, feed upon, exploit. And for all that people call carnivals a scam or a con, they're nothing of the sort. We go to them to *be* exploited. That's part of the charm. While you're there—among the dizzying overload of lights, chatter, excitement, sticky ground, and thronging people—you feel that there *must* be more than enough energy to go around.

Human exhilaration is a renewable resource. And you can generate it with cheap stuffed animals and fried foods.

Painter was surprised at how busy the place was. But they'd left patrol early, and the night was young yet. People packed the carnival, heady with the knowledge that within a short time, news would come back with finality. They were not alone in the cosmere. It's an important revelation for a society, second only to realizing that the rest of us have been visiting for quite some time now but never got around to explaining. That sort of thing tends to cause a lot of unfortunate paperwork. Sometimes also panic.

It's true that Painter's planet isn't among the most cosmopolitan or relevant to the cosmere's political or economic landscape. I still recommend you visit. Trust a guy who spent a couple years

there as a statue. Few can throw a party like a planet confined to an eternal night.

(In his language, by the way, they obviously didn't use the actual word "carnival." Like with everything else, these are my words to describe their world. You might be interested to know that the word they *do* use roughly translates, in your language, to "place of a million lights." Their term for the workers there? "Light keepers.")

Painter strolled alongside Yumi, trying to keep from being walked through by members of the crowd, since he found that unnerving. Yumi took in the sights, her eyes reflecting the spinning hion of rides and the twinkling rhythms of the large bulbs on the fronts of stalls—like on a runway, trying to guide a person in to land in their particular trap. Was the gaudy mess nauseating to her?

"It's wonderful," she whispered. "It's like someone broke the sun itself into a million pieces and threw it in the air like confetti. This has been here all along?"

"Well, it usually only runs on festival and rest days," he said.

"We could have come and seen it? Why don't you come *every time* it's open?"

He shrugged, enjoying her wonder.

"What are all of these?" she asked, pointing to the stalls.

"Games."

She cocked her head.

"Games?" he said. "You play them?"

"Like an instrument?"

He stopped in place, staring at her. "Your (lowly) life was so ridiculous, Yumi. You've never played a *game* before?"

She shook her head, so he waved for her to walk up to one of the stalls with a line. That way the carnie would be focused on the customers, not a random gawker. Yumi watched with fascination as people tried to knock down boxes by throwing a large ball.

"So…" she said at his explanation, "it's…a challenge? Like trying to stack a pile higher than you've ever done?"

"Yes!" he said, pointing. "Yes, that's it. Games are fun challenges."

"These people are having fun?" she asked, as a man at the front of the line cried out after getting all the boxes down but one.

"Well…it's fun when you win…" Painter said.

Someone in the next stall walked away with a large stuffed creature. Yumi watched that with even more consternation.

"So…" she said, "you knock the boxes down, and you get one of those beasts."

"Yes."

"And they're extremely valuable?"

"Um…well, no. They're pretty cheap, actually. We could go to a store and buy a dozen of them for the price of a nice pair of shoes."

"I am *so* confused."

"It's not about the prize," he said, gesturing for her to follow him as the carnies started eyeing her. "It's about *winning*. The prize is proof. A memento? To remember the day? It becomes more valuable because of the good feelings it evokes. Beyond that, people just like to have things sometimes."

"I think…that might make sense," she said, strolling alongside him, holding to the strap of his painter's bag over her shoulder. He'd told her to bring it because sometimes if people knew you were a painter, they treated you with deference. Might convince some carnies to look elsewhere for easy prey.

"I like my clothing," she said. "The first thing I've ever owned. I like *having* it. The dress reminds me of Akane and that day shopping."

"See?" he said.

For some reason though, she was growing morose. Was she remembering the things Akane had said about him? With a sudden desperation, he wanted her thinking about *anything* else. But before he could speak up, she smiled, then spun around, arms extended.

"Your job, Nikaro," she declared, "is to escort the yoki-hijo on her first—and likely only—trip to a carnival! You must make it an *experience*!"

"I thought you said," he told her, ducking around a couple sharing fluff candy, "we weren't painter or yoki-hijo tonight."

"Then you escort just the yoki part! The girl at a carnival for her first time! Present it to me, man from another world. Wow my primitive mind with your advanced alien technology and lights!"

"Well, fortunately," he said, stepping in front of her and gesturing to himself, "you've come to the right person. I've been visiting carnivals since I was a child, and I can eagerly introduce you to every *unique* aspect of the phenomenon."

"Excellent," she said, strolling forward, Painter walking backward directly in front of her—occasionally passing right through people. If they thought a lone painter talking to herself was odd… well, they thought painters were odd anyway. So who cared?

"Where do we start?" she asked.

"With the food," he said, dancing to her right and pointing to a stall with fried pop'ems. "It is the most incredible, delectable, *amazing* food you will ever eat—"

"Wow!"

"—for the first bite."

She looked at him, frowning.

"Carnival food," he said, "has this strange property. Each bite you take tastes increasingly artificial, oily, and overly sweet. Until you get done, and (lowly) wonder why you *ate* all of that. It's truly magnificent."

"You're exaggerating."

"Am I?"

Five minutes later—her fingers sticky with the remnants of powdered sugar, an empty bag of pop'ems in her hand—she looked toward him with a nauseated expression. "That was *awful*," she said.

"Isn't it?" He grinned.

"I need another."

He directed her to get some cheese powder rice puffs, as they tended to last a little longer before the gross part reared its head. Once she was happily chewing on them, he led her toward the center of the festivities.

"I'm *modestly* impressed," she said. "But you're going to have to do better than strange foods, Painter."

"Well, we also have rides."

She looked at him, then blushed. "I don't know what those are either. I'm sorry."

"They're…" Huh. How to explain. "Have you ever been in a bus—or a wagon I guess—that was out of control?"

"Once. It was terrifying."

"It's like that, but *fun*."

"I'm not convinced you have any idea what that word means."

He grinned. "Remember the flight on the tree?"

Her eyes went wide. "You have flying trees here?"

"Not exactly," he said. "But things sort of like that. Less magical, maybe, but also safe—so you get the exciting part without the dangerous part. But you get to *pretend* they're still dangerous, so you can be afraid. In a fun way!"

"Wonderful food that is also gross," she said. "Experiences that are at once terrifying and not. Are all of your modern wonders self-contradictory?"

"Contradiction," he said, "is the *core* of modern life." He smiled at her. And he loved the way she smiled back.

He gestured, and led her past several of the performers—a strong man lifting impossible weights. A "living statue." (Bad imitation in my estimation.) A fire-breather. Yumi appeared to legitimately love each of these.

"You have experts," she whispered while watching a performer swallow a cane four feet long, "in the *strangest* things." She tossed far too large of a tip to the man and bowed formally to him.

From there, the games. She was terrible at them. But he found it fascinating how she tried each one in the row, then settled on one—the game where you knock down the boxes—and paid the carnie for *ten* tries.

"We're going to run out of money quickly at this rate," he said, leaning against the counter as she concentrated and threw the ball, missing. "You should have picked the balloon popping game."

"That one is random," she said. "You can't win it except by accident." She narrowed her eyes, throwing another ball. It bounced off the boxes.

"And that is bad?" he asked.

"I must be presented with a challenge of skill and not fortune, Painter."

"Well then, try the coin toss," he said, as she threw again and the ball bounced free. "This one takes strength like Tojin has to win."

"No it doesn't," she said, then threw the ball and got a lucky hit, toppling all of the boxes.

"Ha!" the carnie said, leaning down. "You can take the small prize…but do *that* four more times, and you get the largest prize!"

"Yes," Yumi said. "I read the rules."

Then she proceeded to knock over four more stacks of boxes in a row. The carnie's jaw dropped.

"Oh, (lowly) incredible," Painter said, smacking his forehead. "It's a balancing trick, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "One of the boxes is weighted on the bottom in such a way as to make the entire thing seem less stable than it is. Getting that one is key." She pointed at the largest of the stuffed animals—a dragon eating a bowl of noodles. (Quite fanciful. The dragons I know prefer steak.)

"Advice," Yumi said as the carnie handed her the dragon—which was nearly taller than she was. "Don't put the weighted box in the same corner each time. It makes the pattern easy to exploit."

The carnie scratched his head, then grinned at her. "You've still got two throws left."

"Give them to the next child who visits," she said, then walked off, head held high, Painter trailing. "You're right," she said to him. "This trophy feels…satisfying. And soft. How do they make it so *soft*?"

"By tradition," he said, leading her to a less populated section, "you now must give it a name."

"Hm…"

"A *silly* name," he added.

"Why silly?"

He gestured at the giant pink dragon.

"Right," she said. Then she blushed. "I…don't do silliness very well, Painter."

"No problem. It's one of my more impressive features. Let's see…silliest name…" He grinned. "She shall be known as the fearsome Liyun Noodleface."

Yumi gasped. "Painter! That's irreverent."

"Perfect," he said. "Job done." Then he turned, picking out one ride in particular. The highest in the carnival—the massive Jotun Line. You don't have anything quite like it here, though on some worlds they build rides like these as wheels that slowly carry people in a lofty circle above the carnival.

In Kilahito, they'd ended up designing something that was similar, but not circular. Instead the seats went straight up along a tall steel post, then paused at the top for the best view before turning and coming down the other side. It moved slowly, with a near-constant rotation of two-person pods.

Painter gestured to it. "I might have located the best local equivalent of a flying tree."

She tipped the dragon to the side, having trouble seeing while carrying it. Her eyes widened as she saw the ride. Then, remarkably, she gave the dragon to a little girl who had been standing nearby gaping at it.

"Farewell, Liyun Noodleface," Yumi said, waving as the little girl hopped off with the giant plush over her head. At Painter's curious look, Yumi shrugged. "I think I'm a little too new to owning things to have an enormous pink dragon."

He smiled, then led her to the ride. There was a long line, but as they approached, the ride conductor spotted her—or more specifically, her painter's bag.

"Painter," he said, waving her forward. "Thank you for your service."

Everyone in line politely clapped as he ushered her into the next cab, letting her have the two-person seat to herself—which was convenient, as it left room for Painter to slide in beside her. She put the bag by her feet as their cab swung into position and inched slowly upward along the post as other cabs were unloaded and filled.

"Is that common?" she asked him. "The way they treated me because they thought I was a painter?"

"It happens now and then."

"I thought you'd said that no one cared."

"They care about being safe," he said. "They care that someone is out there doing what I do. At the same time, we make them uncomfortable. We're a reminder that things lurk at night, feeding on their nightmares." The cab inched up to the next stop. "We're not like yoki-hijo. There are only a handful of you, but it's easy to train a nightmare painter; basically anyone who goes through the schooling can do it. You don't have to be a master to make something that will trap a nightmare."

"But you are," she said softly. "A master."

"I thought I was." He paused, then looked at her. "Would it matter to you if I was?"

She gave it some thought. Someone else probably would have responded immediately with assurances he was good enough. He liked that she didn't do that, though he found himself waiting, breathless. And not just because he didn't breathe anymore.

"It matters," she said, "that you've stopped painting. It doesn't matter that you didn't get accepted by the Dreamwatch."

"But it does," he said. "If I'd gotten accepted, my whole life would be different."

"Would it have changed who you are?"

"I suppose not," he said. "Maybe my failure is what told me who I really am. The man who would lie to his friends. Maybe it's better I didn't have those when I was younger. Fewer people to betray."

He looked toward her and found her eyes glistening, teary. "I'm so bad at this," she whispered.

"What?"

"I was supposed to be distracting you. Yet here we are again, having the same conversation."

"No, Yumi," he said (highly). "It's fine."

"It isn't though. We did everything wrong, Painter. I wasn't supposed to fixate on winning that prize—I was just supposed to throw and enjoy the company. I see that in the way others are acting down below. I…I don't know how to be a person, Nikaro. You have to explain to me how to have *fun*."

"I like explaining things," he said, causing her to look at him again. "Yumi, I'm a painter. Do you remember why I said I loved it?"

"To share it," she whispered. "To see the delight of your creations with your friends…"

Painter gestured as they continued upward, high enough that the chaos of the carnival instead became a *pattern*. Flowing pathways, spinning rides like fanciful geometries. Lights, once garish and overwhelming, became twinkling accents to a wonderful tapestry.

Her eyes widened.

"Not quite as breathtaking as flying," he said.

"No," she whispered, "but I love it. I love not feeling afraid. I love being able to linger." She stared for a time, but then saw one of the other couples in their cab pass, coming back down the other way. Those two cuddled up close with a jacket around them.

"We can't do this right, Painter," she said. "We—"

"Yumi," he interrupted, feeling an unfamiliar emotion.

Contentment. How long had it been? Years? Even with everything else, even in their strange situation…being in that cab that night, with light dancing beneath them…was perfect.

She looked at him, cocking her head.

"Are you happy?" he asked softly. "Right now. Worries ignored. Problems forgotten. Are you *happy*?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"How long has it been?"

"I don't think I can remember a time," she said. "There are…vague memories. Of laughter. A home. A place where the floor was never too hot, and where someone held me. I might have just imagined all of that… You?"

"My birthday," he said, "first year of upper school. About a month before the test to join the Dreamwatch. The following month was awful, stressful as I tried to prepare every last moment. That day of my party though—with friends and my paintings, a place I thought I belonged… Masaka made me a hat."

"Was it black?"

"More like a helmet," he said, smiling. "With spikes. She said it was a birthday hat."

They stopped in place as the ride paused for the couple at the top of the pinnacle to have a moment. Painter felt warm, even though it was colder up this high. He felt as if he were wrapped in a blanket. With the best view in town. And he wasn't looking at the city.

"Maybe," Yumi said, with a smile, "it's all right if we do things the wrong way. As long as it's the *same* wrong way."

She rested her hand on the bar in front of them—right near his—as the ride brought them up into the top position. He wanted so badly to be able to hold her, but had to content himself with moving his hand an inch closer to hers—until he felt the *barest* sense of electric warmth at their touch.

It thrummed through him, like magma injected into his veins. If he'd looked closely, he would have seen two little lines—like electric sparks—connecting his skin to hers. Magenta and azure.

Together they enjoyed the silent presence of one another, drinking in the moment. It's said that everything you eat, even the air you breathe, becomes part of you. The axi that make up the matter you take in come to make up *you* instead. I, however, find that the *moments* we take into our souls as memories are far more important than what we eat.

We need those moments as surely as the air, and they linger. Potent. Yes, a person is more than their experiences, stacked up like stones. But our best moments are the foundations we use to reach for the sky.

Eventually, after what felt like a lifetime that passed too quickly, their cab reached the bottom. Yumi slipped out, settling the oversized painter's bag against her back. Wordlessly, the two of them strolled away from the carnival. Now that they'd been to the sky, the chaos at ground level seemed distorted. Like a painting seen so close-up you could no longer make out the meaning.

They trailed vaguely in the direction of Painter's apartment. The streets grew quiet—the carnival receding into their past—as they entered sections of the city that acknowledged the late hour. Even the homes felt sleepy, the drawn drapes drooping eyelids. Only the ever-present hion lines floating above lit the way, painting cobbles and concrete.

Neither of them wanted to break the moment. Until finally Yumi stopped and dug into the painter's bag. She pulled out the smaller sketchpad and knelt, taking out a small paintbrush and a jar of ink.

"Yumi?" he asked, leaning down.

She held up a finger to still him, then unscrewed the ink jar—twisting it the correct way this time—and dipped her brush. Then she proceeded to paint a picture of what they'd just experienced. A view in the first person, looking out at the landscape below. In front of that, their hands on the bar of the ride's cab. Except in this, their hands overlapped.

It wasn't a very good painting.

Considering the experience of the one responsible, that won't surprise you. But for a person who'd first picked up a brush twenty-three days earlier, it was quite remarkable—in the same way that the drawing of one eight-year-old might be better than that of another.

Regardless, here's the thing: art doesn't need to be good to be valuable. I've heard it said that art is the one truly useless creation—intended for no mechanical purpose. Valued only because of the perception of the people who view it.

The thing is, *everything* is useless, intrinsically. Nothing has value unless we *grant* it that value. Any object can be worth whatever we decide it to be worth.

And to these two, Yumi's painting was *priceless*.

"I realized something earlier," she said. "When we were talking about owning things. I realized…I don't own anything. And never will…"

"The clothing—"

"Will stay behind, Nikaro," she said softly. "When this is all over."

Right. He hadn't considered that. Once…whatever had happened to them was through…once the spirits decided to end the Connection…

Well, Yumi would wake up one day in her body. And he in his. On separate planets.

She stood up holding the painting, letting it air-dry. Her eyes large, like pools of ink awaiting a brush. She smiled again, a different smile. Not joyful. Melancholic.

"This," she said to him, "is for you. To remember me when I am gone. What did you call it?"

"A memento," he whispered. "To remember the day."

"Valuable because of the good feelings it evokes," she whispered, then carefully folded the dried painting and tucked it into the inside pocket of her jacket. "If we wake up tomorrow and it's all over,

you'll have this. So you don't forget me."

"I could *never*. Yumi, maybe we could…"

What? Travel the space between planets? Even if the government allowed a couple of youths to do something like that—which was highly unlikely—she was still a yoki-hijo. One of only fourteen on her whole world.

She couldn't have a life like he had briefly let himself dream she could.

"I want you to know," she told him, "that *I* don't think you're a liar."

"I literally did lie though," he said. "It's a fact."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because…I was too weak to tell the truth?"

"Because," she said pointedly, "you didn't want to hurt the people you loved."

"I lied to you."

"Again," she said, "because you wanted so *desperately* to be the thing I needed. You wanted to help me, Painter. And yes, maybe you wanted to pretend to be someone great. That's not the action of a liar, but a dreamer." She nodded sharply. "I was taught that a liar is someone who takes advantage of others to get gain. That's *not* you. It's never been you."

She leaned closer to him, as close as they could get without touching. "I don't blame you, Nikaro. Maybe stop blaming yourself. You see, I've learned one thing from your world, more than any other."

"Which…is?"

"Answers," she said, "are not simple. They never were."

He smiled back, then closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. It was strange how much of a difference those words meant. That someone didn't judge him. That she knew exactly what he'd done, in all its horrors, and…didn't care? Didn't blame?

Perhaps he should have been strong enough to come to a similar conclusion on his own. Perhaps he should have been a lot of things he wasn't. But in this case, having someone say it—someone who *mattered*…

It was like a painting he could share. He opened his eyes…

To find Yumi stumbling backward, eyes wide, lips frozen in a mask of terror. He spun to see something lurking from the alley behind them: a nightmare of jagged blackness, fully eleven feet tall, with claws that sliced the wall in large gouges. Eyes like pits of white, and a mouth with actual teeth.

The nightmare. It was fully stable now.

It had, inexplicably, come *looking* for them.

Chapter 29

IT WAS YUMI'S second time seeing a nightmare.

The other was to this one as a puppy was to a wolf. The stable nightmare reared on two lupine legs, powerful and somehow more *real* than the previous one she'd seen. Its darkness had coalesced, hardened, its skin spines, and those eyes—voids of anger. It towered over them, and when it stepped the nails on its feet tore gouges in the pavement.

"Run," Painter said. "Yumi, *RUN*!"

His voice sliced through her terror, and she recovered enough to turn and dash away, clinging to her painter's bag—not because it would be helpful, but because she needed *something* to hold on to.

The nightmare gave chase. Silent save for what sounded like metal on stone. Painter ran out in front of her, looking as frantic as she felt—she thought he was leaving her, but no. He was *leading* her. He waved as he dashed for an alley just ahead of her. She followed him in, nearly tripping at the hard left turn.

The nightmare beast, far more bulky, responded less quickly. It skidded past, then had to heave itself back after them. Yumi—against her better interests—glanced behind her as she ran, and saw it darkening the mouth of the alley. It reached in with two enormous hands, one against each wall, raking the stone and cracking a window. Then it fell to all fours and began charging again.

"The bell!" Painter shouted as they burst out the other end of the alley. "Ring the bell!"

They crossed a street, entering a wide open place with smooth stone ground that held sections full of wood chips and strange erections of metal and wood. The first time she'd seen one of these, she had thought it might be some kind of art installation—and had laughed when she was told it was a sports court and playground.

Painter led them past some of the playground equipment, perhaps thinking it would slow the beast—but the nightmare ripped through the metal, tossing a jungle gym. Hopefully the noise would attract someone. Yumi added a belated scream to the cacophony, and almost pulled the bell free—but a chunk of metal hurled by the monster clipped her, knocking her to the ground. Her bag skidded out of her hands.

A *crack* followed, then ink stained the bag, flowing from the opening.

The beast hesitated, seeing that.

"Come on," Painter said, hovering near Yumi, waving urgently.

She found her feet and turned toward the bag.

"No," he said. "Leave it."

Trusting his instincts, she ran with him across the playground.

"Head this way," he said, pointing down another alleyway. "The nightmare can see me. I'll lead it to the south. You curve around the block, then sneak up and grab the bell. Ring it. *Don't* try to confront the thing. Understand?"

She nodded, too terrified to trust her voice. If she opened her mouth, she'd scream.

Out in the playground, the thing had given the ink a wide berth, but now came for them again. Painter took a deep, wide-eyed breath—even though he was a ghost—then ran back out. He didn't wave at the thing to draw its attention; he just *ran*. The thing turned after him, and Yumi didn't wait to see the result of their chase. She did as Painter had said, running down her own alley and ducking around the rear of a building, breathing heavily.

There, she stood trembling, spine pressed to the bricks, sweating and taut—every muscle like a rope trying to haul a tree from the sky. She knew she needed to keep moving. She needed to sneak back and grab the bell.

She should move. Painter was running for his life. *Move!*

Her body refused.

It's difficult for one who hasn't experienced it to understand how powerfully the body can react to trauma like this. Seeing something so terrible come for you—*knowing* it intends to not merely harm you, but likely *feed* upon you—goes against all rational experience. You end up reaching someplace deeper than your thoughts can go, sinking to instincts hard-coded into your very essence.

Overriding those is not simply a matter of willpower. It requires training and experience. So Yumi trembled there, huffing, dazed—and had to *fight* to keep herself from running away as fast as she could. It is to her credit, not her condemnation, that she remained frozen. The only viable alternative her body would accept involved mad, uncontrollable flight.

A hand grabbed Yumi on the arm.

She bolted upright, finding a large figure standing beside her that had approached completely unseen—not because it had been particularly quiet, but because she hadn't been able to concentrate on anything other than her fear.

Hysterical, she swung her fist at it—and it grunted. Then…then said her name? Her eyes focused, and she saw for the first time that it was…Tojin?

Yes, the painter Tojin, sleeves rolled up, shaking her arm and saying her name. Again. Again.

Finally she registered it, and emerged a tiny bit from her frenzy.

"I told you it sounded like her," Tojin said over his shoulder. Calm. Too calm. He *didn't know*.

Akane walked up, arms folded, painter's bag over her shoulder. "Yumi," she said. "You promised you wouldn't go out anymore. We *told* you how dangerous this was."

Technically, Yumi hadn't promised she wouldn't go back out. They'd just lectured her on it, and had assumed compliance from her contrite bows.

She wasn't in any state to argue that point. "How?" she said, her voice hoarse. "How did you find me?"

"We tailed you," Tojin said, "when you left the apartment earlier. We…well, *I* thought you'd go back to it."

"I trusted you had more sense than that," Akane added.

"We lost you for a while there," Tojin said. "Did you go to the carnival *specifically* to lose us?"

"Tojin…" Akane said, squinting in the dim light. "Tojin, look at her. She's *terrified*. Yumi, did you see another one?"

Yumi could only nod.

Tojin sighed. "This is *why* we said to not go out again. This is a duty for a painter."

Painter.

The bell.

Yumi knew, even after one experience with the nightmare, that Akane and Tojin alone wouldn't be enough to defeat it. They needed every painter in the region—hundreds, if she could find them.

And Painter, *her* Painter, was in danger.

"Bring your ink!" she said, then tore out of Tojin's grip and went scrambling back down the alleyway. She didn't see his bemused expression, nor the roll of Akane's eyes. Because of course they didn't recognize the danger. They'd done this hundreds of times. A nightmare, to them, was nothing terrifying.

Yumi reached the mouth of the alley and looked out at the torn-up playground—ghostly in the hion light. Still and empty. Several lights turned on around nearby buildings, then quickly shut off. This was painter business. Thank you for your service.

Suddenly apprehensive, Yumi crossed the playground onto the sports court, where her bag had fallen. She searched in it and found it sliced apart by claws, the bell broken and covered in ink. As she was struggling to comprehend this, something dark emerged from within a piece of fallen playground equipment. It grew to eleven feet tall, stalking up to her from behind.

Painter had eluded it. But this thing was *smart*. Dangerously crafty. Beyond that, there was a deeper problem. An issue Yumi and Painter couldn't have anticipated. This thing could *feel* Yumi's presence.

It knew where she was. Always.

This was why it hadn't rampaged. Yumi didn't know it yet, but this was what the creature had been doing all those weeks. It had been drawn to her. Had been watching her. Waiting for a chance to attack.

She felt it before she heard it. She spun and—too frightened even to scream—gasped as it rammed a clawed paw into her chest. The claws pierced her straight through, though they fuzzed right before they struck.

It would have killed almost any person, but Yumi had something this beast wanted. Power, Investiture, *soul*. Where it had needed to lap at others, here it could *guzzle*. Instead of spearing her physically, it let its blade-claws become incorporeal as they touched her—and this allowed it to

draw out her essence.

Yumi felt an icy cold expanding from her core, as if her heart had been frozen—like the ice in drinks Design served—and was pumping frost through her body. Her gasp wilted, and she slumped to the ground, breathing out a cold mist.

She *felt* herself dying. Going to a place where there was no warmth, and could never *be* warmth. And…

And…

And she would *not* go without a fight.

Her emotions—the primal nerves that had been sending her into a panic all night—backed up against the wall of death. And from within her welled, like the fierce anger of a geyser, a *refusal* to be taken like this.

With a trembling hand—shaking like that of a woman a hundred years her senior—she reached to the side. She picked up a chunk of concrete torn up by the beast's passing.

Then she stacked it on top of the one beside it.

The beast hesitated. The flow of power out of her slowed.

Yumi somehow found another chunk, though she was fading now, her burst of strength giving out. It is not a light thing to have a piece of your soul forcibly consumed—trust me.

With numb fingers, she placed the stone.

The monster didn't appear frightened, but it leaned forward, no longer feeding. It stared at the stones with bone-white pits for eyes. Something in it seemed to…remember.

A second later a scream made it spin. Tojin had finally ambled out of the alleyway and—horrified by the sight of a fully stable nightmare—he fell backward to the ground. Akane screamed from behind him. Yes, they'd seen nightmares before, but never anything like *this*. It had an air about it, a debilitating sense of primeval danger.

The nightmare ripped away from Yumi, leaving her slumped against the ground, trembling. Her vision began to darken at the edges, her body going frigid as if she'd been left for a day in a blizzard.

She could only watch as the thing reached Tojin and Akane. These two it could kill. These two weren't even worth a *bite*. These it would rend, destroy. It raised a claw to strike Tojin, who lay terrified on the ground.

Then Painter arrived.

Her Painter. He stepped over Tojin's supine form, having rounded the street behind, looking for Yumi. He placed himself directly between the thing and Tojin and thrust his hand to the side, where a large paintbrush burst from his essence and formed as if out of silver light. He wouldn't remember creating it, and after the fact wouldn't have been able to tell you how he'd done it.

Akane had dropped her bag, breaking the ink jar, in her haste to get away. She'd tripped and fallen in the alley, and now—remembering Tojin—was trying to crawl to him in a panic. Neither of them could see Painter.

But Yumi could. Her angle was just right to look past the monster, looming on hind legs. To see the terrified Painter clutching his brush, confronting the thing. To see his shape itself begin to warp and fuzz, as it had before, crumbling like a statue whose outer layers were being scraped off by a terrible wind.

That Painter. Shaking. Breaking. Overwhelmed.

That Painter rammed his brush down into the ink spilled from Akane's bag and began to paint.

A long line on the concrete. Knob on both ends. A sprig of bamboo. The shape of the nightmare twisted for a second, then—eyes going wider, deeper, *whiter*—it surged forward at him, driving him

to take a step backward.

Painter, now inches from the thing, went pale. His figure crumbling. Eyes wide. But then Tojin whimpered from below, and something steeled in Painter. He rammed his brush back down, and—with a look of consummate determination—swept it out in front of him at the monster's feet. And began to paint.

No, not just paint.

Create.

Sweeping arcs around him and Tojin, staining the ground with phantom ink. He met the monster's gaze, not even looking down as he drew with his brush.

The nightmare stepped back. And Painter *advanced*. One step after another, driving the thing back with each twist of his brush, creating an artistic masterpiece that burned away behind him as he walked. The ink wasn't real, Yumi thought. The brush should have vanished too, shouldn't it?

But no. At that moment, Yumi understood. The brush was an extension of Painter. It belonged to him. As natural as his own heart. Lying there—watching him drive the thing back by force of skill, art, and sheer *will*—Yumi realized something. She'd been right at the start of all this.

The spirits *had* sent her a hero.

The nightmare began to shrink, twisting in a horrific way, enormous claws shortening, skeleton seeming to *pop* as it constricted. Its face narrowed as it was forced to conform to Painter's vision of it, the one he painted on the concrete. Not a monster at all. Something friendly, with four paws and a wagging tail. The thing recognized this vision for it and let out a howl—fully stable enough to actually *speak*—then turned and loped away, its terrible form restoring as it broke from Painter's spell.

Defeated, embarrassed—but not destroyed—it vanished into the night.

Painter fell to his knees, overwhelmed, the paintbrush finally burning away in his fingers. Behind him, Akane reached Tojin, helping him sit up. The two of them stared out after the nightmare, baffled as to what had driven it off.

Painter looked with a wan smile toward Yumi. Then at last he seemed to notice that she wasn't moving.

"Yumi!" he said, but his voice sounded distant, like she was…was deep underwater…

She tried to reply, but her teeth only chattered together. Her body shivered and spasmed, and her vision was fading—darkness at the sides creeping in further.

"Yumi!" Painter's anxious face above her. "What's wrong?"

"So…cold…" she whispered, her breath puffing.

He knelt above her, panicked, holding up his hands.

The darkness closed in.

Painter *seized* her in an embrace.

His essence mingled with hers. His self and her self mashed into one. A shocking, intoxicating, sensual concoction.

Heat *detonated* within Yumi, a dying fire suddenly given air. It surged through her. His heat. *Their* heat. She gasped with the force of a drowning woman and went rigid.

Painter pulled back, his face streaked with sweat. She caught herself before falling to the ground again, then kept breathing in deep gasps, no longer frozen. Together they sat there, trembling, until Akane and Tojin arrived to help her stand.

Perhaps *now* they would believe.

AN HOUR LATER they sat in the noodle shop again, Painter at his own table nearby, watching the others in their nervous huddle. They constantly asked Yumi if she was all right, as if the answer would change moment to moment.

She did *seem* all right. At least she wasn't dying of the cold any longer. The others had tried to take her to the hospital, but she'd insisted she wanted something warm to eat. And a warm place to sit.

So they'd come here, and she was on her second bowl of broth for the night—spiced and heated to boiling. How she could eat that without burning herself baffled him, but then again, people from her planet had an odd relationship with heat.

Painter felt tired. That thing had drawn something from him, and holding Yumi had done the same. Fortunately, it didn't feel like anything permanent. Hollow fatigue, like he hadn't gotten enough sleep. Never before while in spirit form had he felt drowsy.

He was trying to figure out why the shop was so crowded at this hour, beyond its usual complement of painters. But before he hit on the answer, Tojin arrived and rushed over to the others. They were all there—Masaka and Izzy having been called from their patrols.

"The foreman believed me," he told them. "Particularly after I showed him what had happened to the playground. The Dreamwatch has been summoned. There is a contingent of them in Jito; they'll be here within a few hours."

"That is wonderful," Akane said (highly). "They'll deal with it, Yumi. They'll find it."

"Sorry," Tojin said, settling in next to Akane, "for not believing you earlier."

Yumi met Painter's eyes. Mission accomplished. The stable nightmare would soon be dealt with. If that was why the spirits had paired them, then their job was done.

"We're to go three per patrol," Tojin continued, "until the thing is caught. We're also not to tell anyone."

"I hate that part," Masaka muttered. "The city's people deserve to know."

"You just relish the idea of telling them," Izzy said, poking her in the arm. "Because it's horrific."

"I *hate* horrific things," Masaka said.

"You think nightmares are cute."

"They *can* be," she said. "They can be anything."

Akane glanced at Yumi. "You all right, Yumi?"

"Yes," Yumi said softly. "Better, now that I have something warm in me."

"That was brave of you," Akane said, "to go out to try to prove that your brother wasn't a liar. But it was also *exceedingly* stupid. You realize that now, don't you?"

Yumi nodded.

"He ran, didn't he?" Izzy asked. "When he saw it weeks ago? He ran away to another city. That's why we haven't seen him lately; why he went 'on leave.'"

"No," Yumi said, fire in her eyes, her objection vigorous enough to make Painter smile through the fatigue. "I saw him earlier today. You're all wrong about him. So very wrong."

He blessed her for that, but also didn't miss how the others shared looks. She would never persuade them. That didn't hurt as much as it once had. After all, he still wasn't certain if she'd persuaded *him* or not.

These last few weeks spending time—invisibly, yes, but actual time—with his old friends had reminded him how much he'd enjoyed being with them. He acknowledged how his bitterness had poisoned his mind, like mold on a painting, ruining the true details. He'd been uncharitable in his descriptions to Yumi. Painfully so.

The truth was, these were wonderful people. He appreciated the way Akane kept them all together, like the glue of a collage. So careful never to let anyone feel left behind. He found it endearing, the way Tojin was so enthusiastic about his bodybuilding but also shy about it. Painter even liked how he could never figure out if Masaka was genuinely interested in the macabre, or somehow just oblivious.

He even appreciated Izzy and her…Izzy-ness. They might not be his friends anymore. But he could be *their* friend. In secret. If he let go of that awful bitterness.

Design came bustling over, hands on her hips. "I'm going to find out," she said to them, "what you're hiding from me."

"Sorry, Design," Akane said sweetly. "Painter business. It's the rules."

"Rules don't apply to me," Design said. "I'm not a person. Or truly alive." She shook her head. "Well, sorry about the crowd. Though it *is* to be expected."

"Expected?" Tojin asked.

"Because of the broadcast?" Design said, cocking her head. "The landing? The spaceship? Have you forgotten that your people are about to make *first contact*? Officially at least. Noodle shop owners with nice butts don't count, apparently."

The landing.

That was *tonight*?

Painter turned, seeing the crowd with new eyes. People chattered with an air of excitement, waiting for Design to turn on the restaurant's hion viewer—which she did shortly after leaving their table. Painter rose and stared at the lines of light behind the glass—hung high on the wall so everyone could see. The hion began to shake, then formed into the shape of the lead explorer in his command chair—broadcast all the way from the space bus near the star.

"We've completed our orbit of the planet," the lead explorer said. "It matches the visual inspections via telescope. We get no radio signals, even this close, but our surveys indicate settlements. There are very few land masses though. It seems like these people might spend most of their lives sailing the oceans, for we see many boats."

Boats?

Yumi stepped up to Painter, her eyes wide as they watched.

"Extending our hion lines now toward the surface," the explorer said. That was what had carried them all this way—a pair of mobile hion lines connected back to their planet, capable of letting a space vessel travel like a train, constantly powered, pushed by the lines. How they strengthened the lines enough to stretch all that way was beyond Painter.

"Have you," he whispered to Yumi, "ever visited the oceans on your planet?"

"The what?" she said. "I don't know that word."

"Water," he said. "Enormous bodies of water, like the cold spring, but huge. We have a few of them here—our cities run to the edges of them." One of those oceans could take an entire *day* to cross, he'd heard, using a hion-line boat.

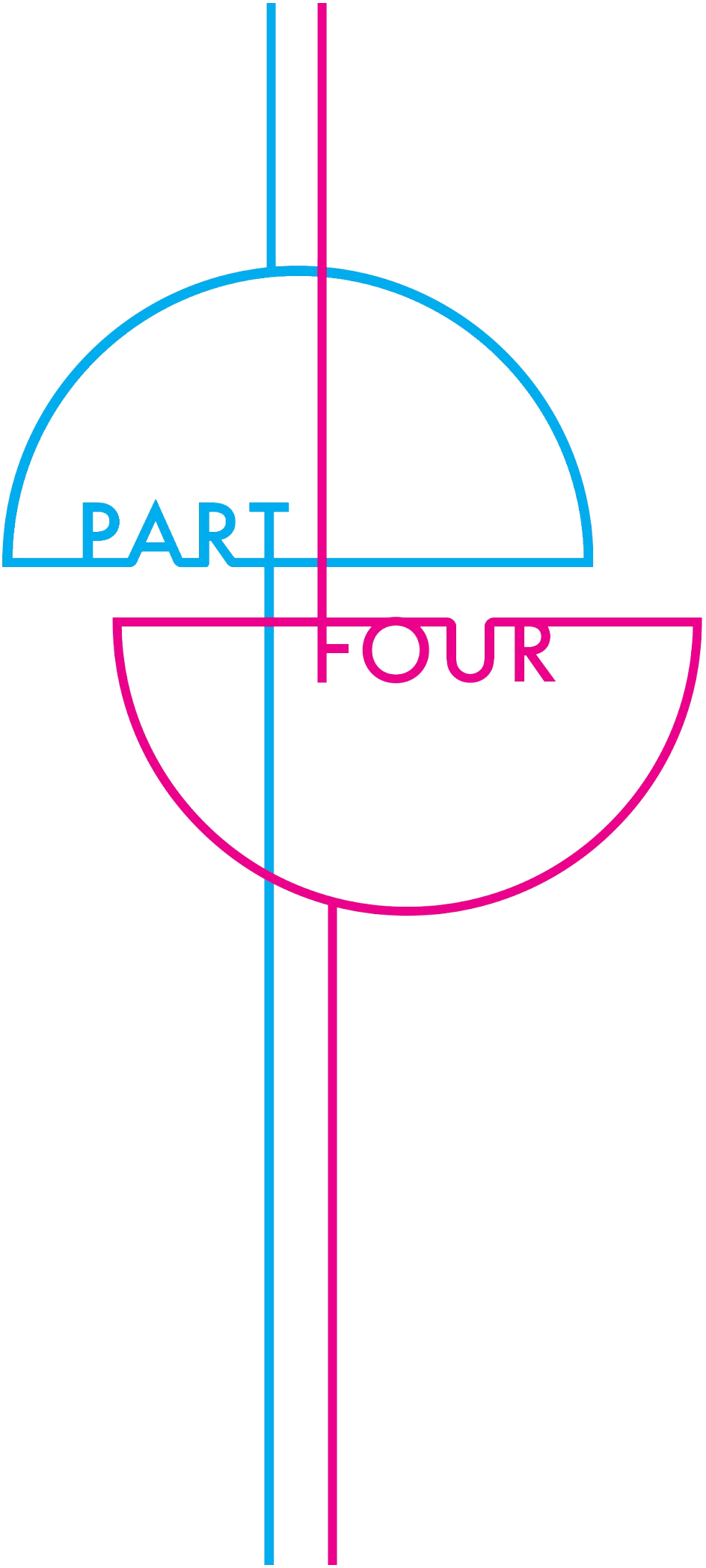
"Water like that would boil away," she said. "There aren't enough high grounds for more than the occasional cool spring. Unless…maybe it's out beyond the searing stones? In the cold wastes, up high?"

He felt a mounting worry as they watched the explorers in the cockpit guide their vessel. He listened to their observations, heard the rattling of the ship as it rode the hion lines all the way to the ground and finally touched down.

The door opened. And the camera turned, in the hands of an explorer, to show the view outside. There, curious beings were coming up to inspect the vessel. Limber, tall, with four arms, the explorers described them as having chalk-white skin. They most certainly *weren't* human.

Though you might have guessed this, Painter was stunned. Yumi wasn't from the star.

She never had been.


PART
FOUR

Chapter 31

"MAYBE IT'S TIME travel," Yumi said, half walking, half floating as she paced in the cold spring. Strange how she'd begun finding the cool water refreshing instead of shocking.

"Time travel?" Painter said, skeptical where he sat in the cold spring with arms out along the stones, resting back, toes peeking from the water.

"You have an advanced level of technology," she said, ticking things off on her fingers. "While we are just beginning to build machines, you have ones that can travel to the *stars*. Our languages are close. Even without the strange gift of the spirits that lets us understand one another, I can see it in the familiar way your writing looks. We are both human. Maybe we're from the *same* planet during different *times*."

"Yumi," he said, beads of water glistening on his bare chest, "this is *not* my planet. The ground is scalding, the sky is too high, and there's no shroud. Your plants *float*. I think I'd know if plants floated on my world."

"It could be the *distant* past," she said. "A lot can change over time, Painter. We should at least consider the possibility."

He frowned, but nodded. She paced back the other direction, water chill as it washed across her thighs and waist with each too-light step. Her theory frightened her. If she was right, the distance between her and Painter would change from incredible to *impossible*. Another world was daunting. Another time…

He met her eyes, and seemed to be thinking the same thing. Perhaps there was another possibility, and she tried to send her mind that way instead. How bizarre that she'd come to relish this time in the cold spring—the renewing water, mixed with the familiar sun and its comfortable warmth. The quiet

time alone with Painter. That should have been unremarkable, with how Connected they were, but it felt like every other moment was filled with things they should be doing.

Or…she admitted to herself…maybe that sense of anxiety at other times was just her. Feeling guilty for not being of use when Painter would have preferred to simply relax.

Either way, the bath was a peaceful time for her. Hair wet against her back, the tips trailing in the water behind her, skin prickling as the top half of her dried while her legs remained in the water—which somehow felt warm by contrast. The most surreal part—the part that only struck her when she stopped to think about it—was how natural it felt.

The last few days, she'd hardly considered the fact that she was bare. Painter seemed to react the same way, no longer staring, no longer embarrassed. He merely floated comfortably, thoughtful as he gazed at the sky and the spinning flowers high above. What had once been the single most stressful moment of her entire life was now just…normal.

"Maybe we're still from different planets," Painter said, "but they're farther apart. Design is from somewhere else. You could be too."

"Maybe," she said, trailing her fingers in the water as she walked. "But Design said she thought that was unlikely. If you think about it, we decided on a whim that we were from two different planets."

"I was looking at the star when the strange event happened."

"Which was completely coincidental. If you'd been looking at a bowl of noodles, would that imply that I came from the land of the noodle people?"

"That's a *perfect* explanation for you." He raised a finger. "Stiff and rigid until you soak her in water."

She gave him a flat stare.

"Come on, Yumi," he said. "*How* long did you spend in the shower yesterday?"

She clasped her hands behind her back and turned away, strolling lightly on her tiptoes, buoyant in the water. "You're right about Mrs. Shinja," she said. "She *really* gets mad about running out of hot water. Why do you suppose I like cold springs in my world and near-scalding warmth on yours?"

"Variety, I guess," Painter said. Then in a lower yet dramatic voice: "Cold noodles with ice for hot days, warm noodles with broth on cool ones. The noodle princess must be master of both realms."

She splashed a huge wave of water at him, and it was satisfying how he cringed—even though it was spirit water and flew straight through him. She smiled, then continued her strolling.

"I'm *trying*," she said, "to solve our problem. Please make an effort to pay attention."

"But we've solved it. Nightmare is dealt with."

"And if the nightmare isn't what caused the spirits to reach out to me? It could still be the machine."

Those scholars *were* suspicious. She wanted to be wrong—she wanted it all to be over now, finished as soon as the Dreamwatch did their jobs—but she was *afraid* she was right. She couldn't let go, not until she knew.

"I suppose," he said, resting back, the tips of his feet popping up out of the water again. "I guess we can solve the problem no matter if we're from different times or different planets. Nothing changes except…"

She slowed, then met his eyes and again saw the unspoken tragedy he acknowledged in them. Neither of them dared say the words. That they didn't *want* this to end. How crazy was it that they would rather live in limbo like this, disorienting though it was, so long as it meant they could be together?

Why couldn't she form the words? Why didn't she dare speak them? Was it because she was afraid if she acknowledged what she felt, she would somehow ruin it? Send whatever it was that was growing between them flying off, like flower petals in a thermal?

Or was it something worse? Something that terrified her more than a nightmare? The worry that maybe he didn't feel the same way. What if her assumptions when looking in his eyes were untrue? What if he *wanted* this to be finished so that he could have his life back, no longer forced to deal with the imperious demands of a yoki-hijo who didn't know how to person correctly?

She struggled to say something. But all she could think of was waking up one day alone, not knowing where he was.

It's going to end poorly, isn't it? she thought with mounting dread. *There's no way for it to work out. It can't work out, not for the yoki-hijo.*

Her life, as Liyun had always promised, was not one of joy. Her life was not her own.

Her life was service.

The two eventually climbed out of the spring to begin dressing. "How long do you think it will take," she asked him, "before my people invent bras? It's difficult to return to this time, wrap a band underneath my chest, and pretend that's good enough."

"I don't know," he said. "You'll need elastic for bras first, right?"

"How should I know?" Maybe *she* could invent them. Sketch it out, tell everyone that the spirits had shown the garment to her in a vision—which, in comparison to some of the ways she'd been forced to distort the facts recently, would be remarkably close to the truth.

They finished and then followed the attendants out to the shrine. There they found a small line of people—as per Painter's morning request. By this point, Liyun had given up on trying to bully him into doing things the proper way.

The townspeople shuffled, confused, as Painter called the first of them forward. Then, looking to Yumi for support and getting a nod in return, he started painting. He kept the art simple, like he'd done other days in the shrine, but he now had models to use—and so even these simple paintings were more skillful, more realistic. More a test of his talents, even if these weren't the powerful, dynamic paintings she hoped he'd someday return to.

She was satisfied as he became absorbed by the work. This *was* a form of meditation for him. She could say the prayers for both of them, and she did so, kneeling and whispering quietly. Like a chorus to accompany the soft sounds of brush on canvas. Music of the most personal variety.

Whatever else happened, this was an accomplishment. A brush in his hand, creating something other than bamboo.

She finished her basic prayers and moved on to meditation. Clearing her mind. Yet when she soothed away everything else, she was left with a sense of dread. None of her usual tricks—counting her breaths, repeating a phrase over and over, humming to herself—banished it. Each time she sank toward the deep waters of nothingness, she found that same sensation of doom. Impenetrable. As if it were the natural state. The color and texture of the canvas, once the paint had been washed away.

Something was still profoundly wrong. Solving the trouble with the nightmare was not nearly enough. And their time was running out. She wasn't certain how, but as she beat her mind against the dread, she knew it to be the case.

"Painter," she said, opening her eyes.

"Hmm?" he asked as a townswoman bowed to him and moved on, carrying a bemused expression and his painting of her.

"What's beyond the shroud?" Yumi asked.

"I don't think anything's beyond it," he said as the next townsperson stepped up. "It covers everything."

"Are you sure?"

"I…I guess I'm not. And Design wasn't *that* certain either. We learned geography in school, but it talked only about Nagadan. There are some other nations out beyond ours, smaller. Around a dozen of them, and they're always squabbling. I didn't learn much about them. Beyond those…well, we never actually covered that in classes."

"What if there's an *end* to the shroud?" she said, scooting closer to him, excited. "What if Design is wrong and *this* is what's beyond? You have bamboo in your land, Painter. And rice. Where does rice come from?"

"Plants with four leaves," he said. "I've seen them in fields."

"Same as ours."

"But not flying."

"So the vegetation of our lands is similar," she said. "You could merely have a…a strain of it that was made by the spirits to live without the heat of the ground."

"It's possible, I suppose," he said. "Maybe we could get some maps in my world? See if maybe those have holes or blank spaces that could hold your land? How big *is* Torio?"

She didn't know, although the fact that she traveled it in a loop—visiting villages all along the way—made him think it was smaller than his nation. However, it all seemed farfetched. Two societies like theirs living side by side for centuries, never discovering one another? But…maybe there was one of those oceans he mentioned in the way? Or some other natural feature?

The possibility comforted her. She closed her eyes and focused on the sound of brush on paper, the occasional tapping as he dipped in the ink jar… She sank down and pushed through the sense of dread at last, entering a state of utter stillness. A nothingness where all time, self, and nature were one.

Then, as if placed there *deliberately* from outside, an idea struck her.

She cracked her eyes, hurled out of her meditative state to find the line of townspeople gone and Painter cleaning up his tools. The entire hour had passed just like that, which wasn't uncommon when she meditated.

That thought, that *idea*, was remarkable.

"I know what to do," she whispered, then looked at Painter. "I know something we can try!"

"Okay…" he said, frowning.

"We can't wait for you to get good enough at stacking. I'm sorry, Painter, but it's true. Your progress is remarkable, but we have to move faster."

"I don't understand."

"I'll show you." She reached her hand toward his—then, remembering she couldn't touch him, simply waved instead. She hopped down off the altar onto the spirit of her clogs, then waited impatiently as he tied his on. They soon emerged from the orchard, passing Chaeyung and Hwanji, who jumped to follow. Yumi felt only the smallest stab of guilt at not remaining in the shrine until she was fetched, as was proper.

They passed through the now-familiar town. It was the first time since her childhood training that she'd stayed in one place long enough to learn where everything was. One might have assumed this would make the place feel kind of like home. Yet as Yumi thought about it, the word "home" conjured images of a cluttered little room with a futon, lit by the hion lights outside. It was alien, and yet it was the place where she'd learned what she actually liked. Dramas on the viewer. Clothing that was her own. Noodle soup, light on the salt, chicken broth with a single egg and a pinch of pepper.

Here she was the yoki-hijo. There she was *Yumi*.

And because of who she was, she felt guilty at that realization. It was *exactly* what she'd feared would happen. She had grown accustomed to the delights of his world. She did not regret—could not regret—letting herself indulge. But she *would* pay for that indulgence once this was all done and she lost not only Painter, but her home, her friends, and even her newly discovered sense of self.

You cannot let yourself be happy, a part of her warned. *Because happiness is far, far too dangerous.*

Perhaps that was why she felt such an urgency to finish this before the break became too painful to endure.

As they rounded the steamwell, the air wet and misty from a recent eruption, Yumi was distracted by a farmer fiddling with his flyer—which, like a giant insect with wings outstretched to the sides, buzzed and hovered in front of him, then dropped. The farmer grabbed it before it hit the ground. Then he finally got it moving, soaring up toward the crops above.

Painter walked on past, but she hesitated, bothered. "Painter," she said, "would you ask Hwanji and Chaeyung if something is wrong with that man's flyer?"

The two women appeared embarrassed at the question. "It's nothing, Chosen," Chaeyung said.

"Chaeyung," Yumi said through Painter, "you've known me for years. You can talk to me. It's all right."

They shared a look, then Chaeyung leaned in and spoke softly. "It's the creations of those scholars," she hissed. "They don't work as well, Chosen One."

Hwanji nodded. "Far be it from us to speak poorly of such honored guests of the town. But something's wrong with their creations. That's *fact*, Chosen."

The way they talked—there was an eagerness. Not only because of the topic. They seemed excited by the idea of talking to her, now that she'd given them leave. And…why not? They'd been companions for years, yet they didn't chat. She'd never considered whether that would be painful for them, serving a woman they never truly got to know.

They continued on to the place of ritual, where—right outside—the machine was set up, chugging away and stacking its stones. It worked all day to draw one single spirit; but as the scholars promised, it could work all the time. It might not beat a yoki-hijo, but a hundred of them would far, *far* surpass what the women could create.

Still, Yumi folded her arms—rumpling her tobok—and glared at the machine. Painter stopped beside her and said softly, "It's not bad *just* because it's technology, Yumi."

"Conversely," she said, her eyes narrowed, "it's not *good* just because it's technology. Disliking this machine doesn't have to mean I'm against progress or the wonderful things of your world. I simply think that *this* machine in *this* situation is wrong."

He rested on the fence that encircled the place of ritual. "You're right," he said. "I'm sorry I generalized." He stepped into the place of ritual, Yumi trailing behind. "So, do I get to hear this grand idea now?"

"Pick a rock to begin a stack," she said, pointing.

He shrugged and put on the kneepads and gloves, then settled down near a pile of stones of a variety of sizes. He did a good job picking his foundational stone, then set it on the ground in a shallow nook—one that was practically invisible, but able to add stability.

He *had* learned. In fact, in the last thirty days he'd managed to learn a good portion of what it took to be a yoki-hijo. Unfortunately, perfecting that took *years*. Like the stone, all he had for now was a solid foundation.

He picked up a second rock at Yumi's urging, but before he could place it she stopped him. Then she took the soul of the rock from his hands and weighed it, tested it, *knew* it. She set it down in place, then looked at him, smiling.

"Match that," she said.

He paused, then smiled as well and set his real rock over the spirit one—moving it, twisting it—until they aligned perfectly. Again his training was invaluable. He didn't know enough to be a master, but he now had the basic training necessary to *imitate* one.

Excited, Yumi placed a third stone, then a fourth—with him matching her exactly. Together they built high. Up. Out. Into a sculpture of stone, carefully balanced, beyond anything Painter had managed on his own. At thirty stones, he looked to her with a grin on his face.

"You're not ashamed," she said, "to need help?"

"One of the first things you learn in art school," he said, "is how to imitate the styles of the great masters. It's only once you can keep up with them that you develop your own. I'm just glad I can keep up here." He met her eyes. "This is going to work, Yumi. Let's do it."

They dove into the task, and sculptures grew around them—guided by Yumi, but she let him choose the stones. Let him place the first of each stack. He started placing stones on his own, then looking to her as she adjusted her version in roughly the same position—except better.

If only I could have been trained this way, she thought, feeling as if she could see his skill increasing moment to moment. Working together, their fingers occasionally brushing.

This was *her* meditation. This was something *she* had missed. She realized that over the weeks, she'd lost this—this connection to the stones, the spirits, and even her own heart. She might have been *made* a yoki-hijo, but the art was *hers*. Or together, *theirs*.

The scholars noticed, as did the townspeople. At one point she heard a gasp, and glanced to see Liyun outside the fence, hand to her lips and *tears* in her eyes. Liyun had been looking more haggard lately, worn down, exhausted. It was encouraging to see her so happy today. It probably seemed like a miracle from the spirits to suddenly have her yoki-hijo back. Perhaps it was.

The scholars started arguing. Their machine then started stacking more quickly. They moved frantically, except for the lead one—who was holding the boxy device Yumi had seen last time. The one that let him detect a spirit.

He was staring directly at her.

He knows, she thought. *Somehow. He knows.*

Beside her, Painter had gone stiff. She first thought maybe one of their stacks—they'd done a dozen already—was about to fall. But now his eyes were on the ground, where a glowing red-and-blue teardrop was rising.

Immediately the spirit began to distort. The scholars shouted, and their machine moved even faster. The colors swirling in the spirit agitated, and it began to be stretched and pulled toward the machine.

"No," Yumi said, bowing her head. "Please. *Please.* We have summoned you, spirit. I am your yoki-hijo. Tell me. What do you need? What must we do?"

It forcibly pulled back—like a glop of liquid metal, pooling the bulk of itself near her and Painter as one end was stretched out an impossible length toward the scholars.

"Please," it whispered, the word vibrating through her. Painter's eyes went wide. He could hear it too. "Please. Freedom. *Please.*"

"How?" Yumi begged. "How."

"Stop," it whispered, "the *machine*."

Then it was pulled away, gathered in by the scholars' device. They called for a supplicant to

receive the boon, though the lead scholar remained where he was, hands clutching his nefarious box. He didn't look pleased or self-satisfied for having stolen her spirit. Instead he looked concerned.

Behind him, the scholars made the spirit into a pair of repelling statues for lifting a home. They were smaller than the ones Yumi had made in the past.

The machine, she thought, *keeps a piece of the spirit's soul. That's why the gifts the scholars create don't work as well.* It was collecting strength. To maintain its power. Or…for some other purpose?

"Yumi!" Painter cried. "You were right!"

She shook herself and tore her eyes away from the lead scholar, focusing on Painter. Right?

She'd been *right*. About the machine. About the needs of the spirits. After all that doubting, after all that uncertainty, she'd…been right?

She'd been *right*.

This would all end when she and Painter destroyed that machine.

"IT'S ABSOLUTELY, MOST definitely, assuredly *not* time travel," Design explained to the two of them, resting her elbows on the bar.

"How do you know?" Painter asked.

"Because time travel into the past is impossible," Design said. "I can show you the math."

"Wait," Yumi said. "Time travel into the future *is* possible?"

"Um, yes, dear," Design said. "You're doing it now."

"Oh. Right."

"We can slow or speed up time relative to other places or people," Design said. "That's easier in the Spiritual Realm, where time flows like water into whatever container you provide. But you can't go *back*. Nobody, not even a Shard, can do that."

"What's a Shard?" Painter asked.

"Yeah, we're not going to get into *that*," Design said.

"Very well," Yumi replied, "but many things I assumed impossible proved to be entirely *possible* recently. So perhaps something is happening that you don't know about, Design."

The buxom woman—well, entity—sighed. "You need proof, eh? All right, let's read your aura, little girl." She ducked down and began fiddling with things under the counter.

"Read my aura?" Yumi whispered, leaning over to Painter.

"It's a carnival thing," he explained. "Izzy loves readings. You know how she's always trying to use dramas to guess what people's futures are? It's like that. Old lady sits in a room and squints at you, then tells you what kind of job you'll like. It's…mostly nonsense."

Design popped back up and thumped a large piece of equipment onto the bar. A black box with

some kind of…glass portion on top? Like a viewer?

"Is this normally part of it, Painter?" Yumi asked.

"I've…never seen it done like this before…" he said as Design took Yumi's hand and put it onto the glass plate.

A customer came up for food, and Design shooed him away. When he didn't leave, she stood up tall and snapped, "What? Can't you see that I'm talking to a ghost and reading his girlfriend's spiritweb? Go sit in the storming corner until I'm ready for you."

The man frowned and trailed away. Painter, however, was shocked. Girlfriend?

"Took me longer to find this thing than I wanted," Design said. "Hidden among all his junk. Guy needs a sorting system."

(I have one. It's called my brain.)

Design moved some dials, then hooked the machine up to the bar's hion lines for power. While he waited, Painter reached over and took the spirit of Yumi's soup, pulling it in front of him. He got two bites before it evaporated. He didn't get hungry while a ghost, but he *did* miss Design's cooking.

"Okay," Design eventually said as something began to glow inside the box. "This fabrial will give a far more accurate reading of your spiritweb than I can on my own. Let's see…" She leaned back, frowning, then leaned forward again, studying some…were those words? The waving lines that appeared on a smaller plate at the side?

"Huh," Design said.

"What?" Yumi and Painter said in unison.

"The readings are going haywire," Design said, "because you're *highly* Invested. Like, *super* Invested."

Painter blinked. Then waited for more. Then looked to Yumi, who shrugged.

"Storms," Design said. "Yeah, this is like… Returned-level Investiture. No, more. Elantrian-level. The device isn't built for that kind of reading—and you're screwing with the system something crazy. It's kind of fun. Oooh. I wonder if you'll explode when you die."

"What?" Yumi yelped.

"Highly unlikely," Design said. "But possible!" She grinned. "This is awesome."

"We have *no idea* what you're talking about," Painter said.

"Investiture is what souls are made out of," said Design. "Well, everything is Investiture—because matter, energy, and Investiture are the same. But souls, as you'd call them, are parts of our beings that are pure Investiture. Like…fire is energy. This table is matter. Souls? Investiture."

"And Yumi's spirits?"

"Likely Investiture too," Design said. "I haven't met them, so I can't say. But the nightmares are. Pure Investiture. They're probably *terrified* of you, Yumi."

"We've met several," Yumi said. "And they were very *not* afraid of me."

"Well, they should have been," Design said. "You could maybe consume them, at least screw with them in all kinds of fun ways. Investiture—raw Investiture in particular—is kinda wahoopli."

"…Wahoopli?" Painter said.

"Word I just made up," Design said. "It means weird. Hoid says I should be more literary. He makes up words all the time. So I'm trying it out."

(I do *not* make up words. I have no idea where she was getting that part.)

"Anyway, raw Investiture," Design said, "responds to thoughts. Emotions. *Especially* the thoughts and emotions of heavily Invested beings. Painter, when you paint nightmares, it's your *thought*—your perception of them—that causes them to transform. It's not the actual painting. They can literally

become anything, and because of that they have a weakness. Through concentration, you can force them to become what you envision."

"Huh," Painter said, shocked by how much sense that made to him. Considering how conversations with Design often went.

"Regardless, back to Yumi…" Design said, squinting—not because she needed to, but because she was picking up human mannerisms. (Which was, I can proudly say, part of the point of making her "human" in the first place.) "Yumi, have you experienced any memory loss lately?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Should I have?"

"It's difficult to read your spiritweb," Design said. "You glow like a bonfire, girl. Obscures a lot of things—but I *do* see an excision here. Some of your memories have been bled away."

Both of them again stared at her blankly.

"Everyone imprints memories in their Investiture," Design said. "It's why a Cognitive Shadow remembers everything the body did, if the body dies? Storms, you people don't know *anything*. Look, in highly Invested individuals in particular, memories get spread through your whole soul, okay? And you've lost some. They were cut out. Not many. Maybe a day's worth? Hard to see details, though the scar is right here."

"I…got touched by that stable nightmare," Yumi said. "It seemed to drain something from me. Maybe that was it?"

"That sounds reasonable," Design said, then clapped once, loudly. "All right, done. No more data here. I could stare all day and get nowhere. Like trying to understand one of Hoid's more obtuse jokes."

(Completely uncalled-for.)

"You," Design said, gesturing at Painter as she shoved Yumi's hand off the machine. "Your turn."

"Me?" Painter said, feeling threatened. "I'm not real! I mean, I don't have a body."

"This thing reads souls," she said, pointing.

Reluctantly—but unwilling to appear cowardly in front of Yumi—he put his hand on the machine. He wasn't sure if it was because he expected it or for some other reason, but he could touch the cool plate on the top of the device.

Design watched the vibrating lines on the side. "Ha!" she said, turning so he could see them better. "See?"

"I can't read that, Design," he said.

"You've got a normal soul's worth of Investiture," Design said. "Exactly the level we'd expect for this planet, which has no Shard in residence and where the people haven't been specifically granted extra. Shroud and Splinters of Virtuosity notwithstanding."

"Again," Painter said, keeping his hand on the device, "Shard? Splinter? Virtuosity?"

"Still not getting into it," Design said. "Regardless, I see no evidence of Connection to the past in your spiritweb. Nikaro, you—absolutely, assuredly, conclusively—have *not* been time traveling. This is definite."

"Do I have a Connection to another world?" Painter asked. "Can you read that?"

"Neither of you," she said, "have been traveling to other worlds. You're from this planet, both of you. I can see *that* easily. Though…Yumi has fewer Connections to other people than I'd expect. That's not related to her power; it feels more like…"

"Like I don't know anyone?" she whispered.

"Yeah, that!" Design said. "Never seen a person with so few Connections. You're a very private individual, I take it."

"Yes," she said, looking down.

"I wonder what that's like," Design said. "But I don't wonder it enough to try it."

"How did you see her Connections to others?" Painter said. "I thought you said you couldn't read her well."

"I could see *that*," Design said, rolling her eyes as if they were supposed to understand why. "She's Connected to *you*, obviously. I could see that without the device. And a few others. Then there are these thirteen odd lines…"

"*Thirteen?*" Yumi said, standing up from her stool.

"Yup!" Design said. "Connection lines are easy to see at times, but notoriously hard to read. I don't know what these are Connected to. Didn't look like family though. More a thematic Connection…"

"Yumi?" he asked.

"There are currently thirteen other yoki-hijo," Yumi said. "Where? Where are they?"

"I can't read that," Design said.

"Then what good is this?" Yumi said, gesturing to the device.

"What good is… Yumi, do you understand what a *miracle* this fabrial is? It's reading things that until very recently you'd need a highly specialized individual who could—"

"Are they here?" Yumi asked. "This world. Nearby?"

"Definitely this world," Design said. "That direction, somewhere." She waved vaguely to the west, toward the near portion of the shroud where Painter patrolled. "But…" She sighed as Yumi dashed from the building.

Painter scrambled to follow, caught off guard. "Yumi?" he shouted, stumbling out onto the street. "Yumi. You promised the others you'd stay away from…"

She was running down the street and seemed not to be listening. He took off after her, catching up, then joined her as she eventually emerged from the outer ring of warehouses onto the road that circled Kilahito. She slowed here, walking up to the shroud—dangerously close.

"Yumi?" Painter said, approaching from behind, and reached out—but stopped just short of touching her.

Finally she sank to her knees and bowed her head. He walked around to her side and crouched there, worried.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I thought… Actually, I wasn't thinking. I *felt*. That I wanted to see them. Be with them. It overcame me." She looked at him. "I knew one of them, when I was a child. We were trained together. Did you know that?"

He shook his head.

"Then they took her, separated us," Yumi whispered, "when we were growing to know each other too well. Wasn't good for me, Liyun said, to form an attachment. In the years since, I've never met another one of them."

"What, really?" he said. "Not even in passing?"

She shook her head.

"That feels tragic," he said, settling down beside her and staring at the shroud. Black on black. He knew it was shifting and moving, but he *felt* it more than he *saw* it.

"How did you deal with the loneliness?" she asked softly. "When you were younger?"

"By painting."

"When you make art," she whispered, "it's easy to forget."

"Until you don't have anyone to show it to."

"I never had that problem," she said. "But my audience was never human. I often wished that after

it was all done for the day, someone would be there to tell me I'd done a good job."

"Hey," he said.

She glanced at him.

"Good job."

"I didn't mean right *now*," she said (lowly).

He grinned at her anyway. And eventually she grinned back. Then she idly picked up a few pebbles and broken cobbles from the ground. Unsurprisingly, she began stacking them.

"We're missing today's episode of *Seasons of Regret*," she said. "I didn't even remember. Considering all the…"

"Insanity?"

"Yeah," she said, balancing another pebble.

"Ask Izzy," he said. "She'll know what happened. And will explain. In detail."

"I almost…" she said, balancing a fourth pebble, "would rather not. I'd rather imagine it for myself. So I can pretend it turned out happy in the end."

Painter glanced to the side. This wasn't the best place for a conversation. At the very least, they risked running into Akane and Tojin, who would *never* let Yumi…

He frowned, then stood up.

The shroud was *changing*. Rippling. He almost shouted for Yumi to run, thinking a nightmare was coming out. But then the shroud drew *back*. *Away from them.*

Like darkness before light. Like water evaporating before a terrible heat. The shroud retreated in a kind of curve, bowing inward. He glanced at Yumi, who stacked another pebble.

The shroud pulled back farther.

"Yumi!" he hissed, then pointed.

She followed his gaze, then gasped softly. "What is happening?"

"The stacking," he said. "The shroud is responding to the stacking."

To test this, she placed another—and the shroud pulled back more. It was responding only in a small region, maybe ten feet across. But Painter found the behavior bizarre—until he realized there was an obvious correlation.

"That's how it responds to hion lines," he said, looking toward Yumi. "It's how we survive; hion pushes back the shroud. We build new settlements by extending the lines into the dark."

Yumi selected another handful of pebbles from around the area, then settled herself with a determined expression, stacking one after another, working faster than he'd have dared. Not a single one of her miniature towers toppled. Behind them, he noticed Design approaching, still wearing her apron. It was an odd sight, and he realized he had basically considered her to be a fixture of the restaurant—seeing her was like seeing the bar itself rip up and come sauntering out onto the street.

Design wordlessly joined them, watching the shroud. The darkness lurched with each pebble, but then started to churn and bubble, like water boiling.

"Yumi…" Painter said at this new behavior. "Maybe…"

She increased her speed, building with both hands, growing her towers higher, higher, making the shroud churn and froth and agitate and ripple, then *split*. Right down the center, revealing a human hand, then shoulders and a face—a woman, dressed in the bright tobok of a yoki-hijo—reaching out to them with a voiceless scream. The shroud surged forward again, swallowing her, then bulged out toward the three of them.

Painter yelled and leaped back. Yumi scattered rocks in her haste to get away. Even Design—who had long claimed to be some kind of immortal unaffected by common fears—scuttled away until all three of them pressed their backs to the nearest wall: Painter's whitewashed but unpainted one.

"What (lowly) was *that*?" Painter demanded.

"Your world is *really* weird," Design said. "I have a number to explain how weird. It's high. Super high."

"That was a yoki-hijo," Yumi whispered, looking at them both. "In the darkness. Why?"

Painter shook his head, baffled.

"Could be a nightmare," Design said. "Taking the *shape* of a person—because you were thinking about them. Don't trust anything you see made from that darkness, kids."

"Good point," Painter said. "This could be some kind of trap. Even if it's not, isn't this a distraction right now? The other yoki-hijo are on your mind, Yumi, but what would they want you to do?"

"To follow the will of the spirits," Yumi said. "The scholars' machine—we have to figure out how to destroy it."

"I suggest hitting it," Design said. "Very hard. Preferably with something that is *more* hard. I'd offer myself, as I make an encouragingly mediocre sword, but there are…complications."

"We could just use a rock," Painter said. "Stalk in there and hit the machine while the scholars are confused. What are they going to do? They're a bunch of spindly academics."

Yumi looked horrified. "I couldn't do that!"

"You wouldn't have to," Painter said, glancing back at the shroud—which was stilling. In mere seconds, it appeared identical to how it had before. "I can destroy the machine, Yumi. Maybe that's why the spirits sent for me. They need someone who doesn't care about your society's rules. Someone who can simply walk into that tent and do what has to be done."

"Maybe," Yumi admitted. "But we don't move in haste. We should plan first."

Of course she wanted to plan. "Yumi, you said this is getting worse. You said our time was running out. I don't think we're going to be able to come up with a better plan than just sneaking in and smashing the machine. We aren't soldiers; we have no resources."

"You could be right," she said. "But I can't help thinking we should go into this with more information. Design, you surveyed this world before you landed. How sure are you it was all covered in the shroud?"

"Not that sure," she replied.

"Do you have maps?" Yumi asked. "A way to tell what's out there in that darkness?"

"I don't," Design said. "But…I might know someone who can tell us. Someone who has traveled it extensively."

Chapter 33

DESIGN LED THEM back to the noodle shop. They snuck in quickly, trying not to draw the attention of the many painters coming off shift and gathering at their usual tables. Namakudo, one of Design's assistant cooks, had been forced to come out of the kitchen to take orders.

Design led them through a kitchen full of boiling pots into a small room at the rear filled with… numbers? Yumi stood in the center and frowned, looking at the walls, which were ornamented with long stretches of numerical sequences that flowed and circled around; it was hard to tell where one ended and another began, or if they formed an infinite loop.

"Ah…" Design said. "It feels so good to come here and be near *real* art. Be back quicker than a chasmfiend gobbles a chull." She darted away, leaving Yumi and Painter.

"Do you think she's getting more eccentric?" Painter said, sitting on the floor. "Or is she just comfortable enough with us to let it show?"

"The latter," Yumi said, looking up and finding numbers written even on the *ceiling*. "Definitely the latter."

Design returned a few minutes later with Masaka in tow. Short, too much dark makeup, black skirt and her customary black sweater, collar all the way to her chin, hands lost in her sleeves.

"Ha!" Painter said, leaping to his feet. He pointed. "*Ha!* I knew it. I *knew* she wasn't human."

"Yumi," Design said, "meet Chinikdakordich, the sixtieth horde of the Natricatich strain."

Masaka pulled into her sweater a little farther, like a tortoise seeking the safety of its shell during the heat of the day. "We prefer the name Masaka," she said softly. "We're being human, Design. We're getting very good at it."

"I know you are," Design said, patting her.

"So it's true?" Yumi asked, feeling intimidated. "You're…a creature like Design?"

"Not entirely like her, but yes," Masaka said, looking down. "Is it…so obvious, Yumi? We're figuring out many things. Human girls like cute things. We like cute things." She looked up, and almost seemed ready to cry. "We made *such* a good human. You can't even see the seams in our skin, so long as we wear makeup, and clothing with long neck portions! The trick is to make the entire face one piece. Took years of breeding."

Breeding? One piece? *Seams?*

Uh… Yumi steeled herself.

Painter, laughing, sat back down. She shot him a glare, but he shrugged.

"Yumi," he said, "Masaka being an alien is *literally* the first thing about any of this that has made sense to me."

"I think," Yumi said to Masaka—who evidently couldn't see or hear Painter—"you are doing an excellent job. You're, um, a very cute young woman."

"We are?" Masaka said. She smiled, then stepped closer. Yumi forcibly prevented herself from backing up as the girl—thing—took her hand. "Thank you, Yumi. *Thank you.* Here, this is for you." She slipped something from her pocket and handed it to Yumi. A…

A knife.

"Very good at cracking shells," Masaka said, pointing at the hooked end. "And prying out the insides. Look, look." She pointed at the handle. "Flowers inscribed here. Very cute."

"Very cute," Yumi repeated.

"Don't tell anyone what we are, please," Masaka said. "We are tired of people being scared of us. We are tired of wars. We like painting. Please."

"I…won't tell anyone," Yumi said. "But please, we need help. You…know about what's out in the darkness?"

"No horde," Design said, holding up a finger, "settles on a planet without knowing *everything* about the terrain. I'll bet she's been sending out…um, scouts. Little scouts. To investigate the entire place."

Masaka looked out at the kitchens, then shut the door. "Is it important?" she asked Yumi. "As important as Design said?"

"Yes," Yumi said. "I think it really is."

Masaka took a deep breath. "We… I am not so paranoid as others, Design. I *am* trying to be human. To avoid the conflicts. But I have sent hordelings out. Most of the landscape beyond the cities is wasteland, enveloped in this strange Investiture. Like the slag castoffs of half-refined souls. But there are places we cannot go."

"Cannot go?" Yumi asked, looking at Painter. "What do you mean?"

"Hard places," Masaka explained. "Walls in the blackness, where the Investiture has become solid. Rising up high in the sky, into the atmosphere. Like columns. One vast one a few miles away. Other small ones, circles all of them, like…fortifications."

"Around towns?" Painter asked, standing up, then waving for Yumi to say it—which she did.

"No way to tell," Masaka said. "I can't get through." She wilted. "I am young. I am not so…eager as some of my kind. I don't have the knowledge, have not gathered the power, to deal with things like this. I came here to hide."

"It might be enough," Yumi said, "if you draw out a little map of it, maybe? Where these places are?"

Masaka nodded, and Design went to fetch some paper.

"Towns," Painter repeated, stepping up beside Yumi. "Those circles she found. They're your towns!"

"It's impossible," Yumi said. "I'd *know* if I'd been living in little enclaves inside a vast darkness. We can see all the way to the horizon!"

"The shroud can look like anything," he said. "Design said it could fool us. And you yourself said that people from your lands rarely travel between villages because of the heat of the stone in between. So it could all be some kind of strange cover-up."

"And you really think," she replied, "that of the thousands upon thousands of people who live in my kingdom, none would stroll out and find one of these barriers? That a flyer would never smack into an invisible wall in the sky? You think this could have been hidden from all of us for such a long time?"

"I…" He winced at the implausibility of it all. "Yeah, all right. But I would bet you the biggest bowl of noodles you can eat that if we overlap Masaka's map with a map of your lands, we're going to find a correlation."

Masaka had watched all of this with interest, but didn't seem to find a woman talking to herself to be all that odd. When Design returned with a paper, Masaka knelt down with a fine brush and sketched out a large circle near one edge of it.

"Kilahito," she said, pointing to the circle. "Where we are now." She drew another circle of similar size across the page. "The largest of the impassable zones." Then she drew out several other smaller circles, about a dozen. Yes…those *could* be the size of towns. "The other ones."

"How accurate," Yumi said, "are these distances you've drawn?"

"Hordes have incredible spatial awareness," Design said. "Comes from having bodies that can spread out to the size of a nation. Her guess will be more accurate than most people's instrument-measured surveys."

"Here is a scale," Masaka said, drawing a line at the bottom with some numbers on it. "It is exact."

Painter knelt and studied the painting in detail, then measured the distances using his palm and fingers, something he'd taught Yumi to do for measuring parts of a painting.

"You ready to sleep?" he asked her.

"I'd prefer to eat first," she said. "I never did get dinner."

He nodded. "I'm going to memorize this drawing. See if I can reproduce it exactly. Shouldn't take me too long. After that we can get back to your land and fix this once and for all."

Yumi nodded in return and wandered out to the main room, taking advantage of the longer leash. Design, having put off her customers too long, came out and took charge of the restaurant. So Yumi sat at the counter, watching Masaka join the rest of the painters. They noticed Yumi and waved.

Fix this once and for all.

It might be…the last time she saw these people. Her last chance to be a normal person rather than the collected hopes and needs of an entire people. And so she let herself leave the bar, then trail across the room to the others.

"Yumi, Yumi," Tojin said. "Look at this." He flexed, stretching his…neck muscles? She hadn't ever even thought about the fact that people had muscles in their necks. "What do you think?"

"Your head," she said, "looks small by comparison." She blushed immediately, as that felt rude.

Tojin, however, grinned widely. "Thanks!"

Akane sat nearby, gazing at the ceiling as Izzy kept talking. About dramas, of course. "So it turns out," she was saying, "he *didn't* leave. He thought he had to because he was being *threatened* by his *evil brother*."

Yumi's breath caught.

"His brother," Akane said, "that you *just* told me was dead."

"He *is* dead!" Izzy said. "He set it all up *before* he died! Using people who hate the honor of ronin."

"So…" Yumi whispered, "Sir Ashinata came back?"

"There was an extra episode," Izzy said, "that they didn't tell us about." She raised a finger. "This proves my theory of the importance of dramas. I'm writing a book on their relevance for improving mental health."

Tojin frowned. "What about…drama-horoscope-figgldygrak—whatsit?"

"Old news," Izzy said. "I'm going to be a viewer critic instead. It's going to make me *famous*."

Nearby, Masaka had settled into her seat. And though she didn't say much, Yumi could see her contentment. She understood that. Being an outsider, then finding a place. Being alone, then finding friends.

"I wish," Yumi said, trying to hold back the tears, "that I'd been able to meet you all sooner."

"It's your brother's fault," Tojin said. "He could have invited you at any point. Only did it when he wanted someone to try doing his work for him."

Yumi felt a sudden, *burning* anger.

"I'm surprised," Akane said, "that he didn't try to recruit her to go to his classes for him in school. Considering that all he wanted to do was take time off. He—"

Yumi leaped to her feet, cutting her off. "You," she said (lowly), "do *not* know Nikaro!"

"We…know what he did to us," Izzy said.

Tojin nodded.

"I know he hurt you," Yumi said. "I know it was hard. But did you think about how hard it was for him?"

"Hard for *him*?" Akane asked. "He was quite literally sitting around doing *nothing*."

"Wanting to fix things," Yumi said, "and not knowing how to do so is the most *excruciating* experience *I've* ever had. You don't know him, Akane. You really *don't*. Do you know what it's like to feel the pressure of needing to succeed, not for yourself but because everyone else depends on you? Do you know what it does to someone to realize that your value is wrapped up—almost exclusively—in what you can do for people? To know that if you fail, you become *nothing* to the ones you most love?"

They shied away from her. All but Akane, who leaned forward. "We never thought he was nothing, Yumi," she said softly. "He wasn't our friend *just* because of what we thought he could do for us."

"Did you ever tell him that?" Yumi asked. "Did you ever wonder how he felt? Can you tell me, honestly, that you think he lied because he *wanted* to hurt you? Do you *actually* think he was *enjoying* himself? Sitting alone? Staring at the wall? Trying desperately to think of a way to not let you down? To not fail you?"

"He should have told us," Akane said.

"He should have," Yumi agreed. "He agrees. I agree. You agree. We all (lowly) *agree*! But he *didn't* tell you. It happened. It's over. I'm sorry." She sighed, her rage waning like the last jets of a drowsy steamwell. "You were his friends. He failed you. He ruined your lives. But did you ever think how unfair it was that *he* was *responsible* for *your* lives?"

"I can't pretend," Tojin said softly, "that he didn't hurt me."

"I know, Tojin," Yumi said. "But he loves you all still; I can see it in him. He cannot change what he did, but he is a good person, trying very hard. You don't have to forget what he did. But did you ever think that maybe instead of constant wisecracks and snark you could simply…try to understand?

On that day, when he was rejected from the Dreamwatch, Painter lost everything. Every hope, every dream. He lost his love of what he did. But I think losing you as his friends was the worst of all."

She met each of their eyes in turn, and they glanced away, not contradicting her. Akane, last of all, looked down.

"Thank you," Yumi said, "for the kindness you've shown me these past weeks. I truly appreciate it. But I'm going to be leaving now. So maybe spare some of that kindness for someone who needs it even more."

She bowed to them, the most formal bow she knew, as if to the spirits themselves. Then she turned away, joining Painter, who had just come out of the kitchen.

"Come on," she said, walking toward the door.

"But dinner—"

"I've lost my appetite," she said. "You're right. It's time to end this."

"I DON'T KNOW why you require this, Chosen," Liyun said, kneeling bleary-eyed before Painter in the shrine. "I have fetched it, but…it is one of several *very unusual* actions you've been taking lately."

Painter settled down, listening to the shivering and shaking of the trees, bumping into one another in the wind like a crowd at the carnival. He'd been harsh toward this woman in the past, but…well, he thought he was coming to understand her.

"It's a hard duty, Liyun," he said, "being the warden of a yoki-hijo. If something goes wrong, nobody can impugn the girl chosen by the spirits; she is beyond recrimination. But someone must pay. Perhaps the one who guided her poorly."

Liyun looked up, shocked. Then nodded. "You've grown…wise, over the years, Chosen."

"I appreciate your service," Painter said, reaching to take the rolled-up piece of paper she'd brought. "If you're worried about my unusual actions, you can be content that they've helped more than you can know. After all, my work yesterday proves that I'm returning to myself."

"You…still sleep over twelve hours a day, Chosen."

"What's better?" he asked. "A yoki-hijo who cannot work at all, or one who is slowly returning to herself?"

Liyun nodded again, her head bowed.

"Know that if your Yumi returns," he said, "it's because of what you have done. Your faith in her. Thank you."

Liyun stood, and he was surprised to see tears in her eyes. He'd thought her as likely to cry as a rock was. She bowed to him again, then withdrew, her clogs sounding on the stone until she vanished

down the path between the trees.

"That was sweet of you," Yumi said, kneeling next to him. "I know how she riles you."

"I'm thinking that maybe I understand the pressure she's under," he said. "She could be less a personification of a crusted-over paintbrush, mind you. But…I can empathize."

He held up the scroll that Liyun had delivered, then looked to Yumi and took a deep breath. They'd waited to do this until after bathing and their meditations. They'd needed his paints, after all, at the shrine.

With a firm hand he unrolled the scroll, revealing a map of Torio, Yumi's kingdom. This was the map used by the driver of Yumi's wagon to get from town to town. He studied its scale and nodded. Then, from memory, he painted a copy of Masaka's drawing at the same size as the map, using some grid lines as guides.

He laid his copy atop Liyun's map to find that they overlapped perfectly. The circles Masaka had drawn—each of which represented an impenetrable wall inside the shroud—were *directly* around some of the larger towns on Liyun's map. Kilahito wasn't represented in the map of Yumi's lands, naturally, but the circle that Masaka had drawn indicating the biggest of the walled-off regions was listed on Liyun's map as Torio City. The capital, seat of the queen, home to the university.

(If you're curious about the scale, both nations were relatively small by modern reckoning—less than fifty miles across. There wasn't a lot of life on the planet. Painter's people were quietly content with a small and intimate collection of cities. While Yumi's nation could grow no larger than the steamwells allowed. On these maps, then, Kilahito and the town they were currently in were less than five miles apart.)

Yumi leaned forward as she studied the two maps—his done on thinner paper, so the lines beneath showed through. "Painter," she said, her wonderful eyes so wide they could have been canvases, "you were right. This time *you* were *right*!"

Right. He was right.

Their lands were somehow the same. Cities in Torio existed in the dark space *between* the cities of his nation. No overlap of actual living spaces, but many of them were shockingly close.

"It seems impossible," Yumi whispered. "We're both in the same place. Existing right *next* to one another."

"Like we're overlapping," he said. "Two peoples. One land…" He sat back, proud of having been able to see this. At the same time…what did it change? There was only one way forward. "I need to destroy that machine."

"We need a plan," Yumi said. "One that isn't you simply walking up and trying to beat the machine to pieces with a rock. They'll think we've gone insane—and no matter how spindly those scholars are, you won't get far with all four of them piling on top of you."

"What else do we do?" he said. "Like I said before—we don't have any resources."

"No," Yumi said. "There is *one* resource we have that we haven't tried using in a while. The truth."

He frowned at her. "What are you saying?"

"You've shown me," she said, "that I have more power than I ever dared to wield. The spirits brought you here so that I could realize it. *We* are the ultimate authority in this town. Not those scholars, not Liyun, not even the local officials. The yoki-hijo can ask for anything. Demand anything."

"So we just walk up and insist that the scholars let us break their machine?" he said. "I think they'll ignore us, yoki-hijo or not."

"Then we don't give them any other option."

They locked eyes. The truth. The (lowly) truth. He wished he'd been brave enough to use it more in his own life. He nodded. "Your world, Yumi," he said. "Your rules. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Thank you," she said, moving her hand next to his, almost touching. "*Thank you*, Painter."

She had him quickly step down from the shrine and slip on his clogs. He left behind his paints, including the sketches of townspeople he'd done while waiting for the map. This wasn't a task for a painter, but for a girl of commanding primal spirits.

He found Liyun outside, chatting softly with Hwanji and Chaeyung. Together they bowed as he approached, by now accustomed to the way he decided when his meditations were done.

He stepped up to them, braced himself, then spoke the words Yumi had prepared. "The spirits came to me," he said, "and asked me to destroy the machine that the scholars brought. I do not entirely know the reason, but I believe it is hurting them.

"This knowledge is partially to blame for my erratic behavior lately. I've been trying to figure out how to navigate my duties, the social norms I've been taught, and this strange demand of the spirits. Today, it is coming to a head. I want you to support me in gathering the people of the town. Then, together, we're going to go to the scholars and demand that the machine be destroyed."

All three stared at him. He tried not to wince. And yet, saying it like that…felt good. Actually, it had been easier than he'd imagined.

It was a test with dangerous stakes. How far did Yumi's authority go? How far could he push these people?

"Are you *certain* about this, Chosen?" Liyun finally asked.

Yumi stepped up beside him and spoke, with him repeating the words. "I have never been so sure about something in my life, Liyun. This is what the spirits wish of me. You *will* help me. Either that or you will remove me from my position—but you would have to physically restrain me. Because I am going to deal with that machine right now."

Painter blinked at the force in her words. He'd thought *that* kind of sternness was reserved solely for wayward stone-stacking trainees.

Chaeyung and Hwanji looked to Liyun. Who, at last, bowed.

"You are the yoki-hijo," Liyun said. "If you have *carefully* considered the ramifications to both yourself and to our order…"

"Even if I'm right," Yumi said through Painter, "then others will undoubtedly see it as jealousy. They will paint me as erratic, someone who has lost control of her emotions and her mind after seeing the machine replace her. I will likely be removed from my position. I know, Liyun. Nevertheless, this *is* what the spirits have demanded. So I serve—as you taught me so well."

"You might," Liyun whispered, "spend the rest of your life in…captivity. Serving only under lock and key, stacking with strict oversight."

"And you will be disgraced," Yumi said through Painter. "I know, Liyun. I *know*."

Liyun hesitated, then bowed, a deep and flowery bow. "Chosen," she said (highly). "We are your servants."

"Ha!" Hwanji said, grabbing Painter by the arm. "I *knew* something was wrong with those scholars, Chosen. We had other scholars from the university come to my home village, and they were kind and quiet men who helped us with the disease upon our crops. These men though, they spend all day sneaking around. Shooting everyone dark glances."

"Quickly, woman," Liyun said. "Go and fetch the town officials. We will need their bailiff to execute this command. Assuming it pleases you, Chosen?"

"It does please me," Painter said. "Thank you."

Within half an hour, they marched through town with not just the town's bailiff, but twelve of its strongest men, who carried hammers for breaking stones. Painter walked at their head, Yumi at his side, seeming nervous but relieved.

"It *is* a better plan, isn't it?" she whispered.

He nodded. "You're wrong about one thing though," he said back softly. "You said the machine would replace you. It can't."

"But—"

"It can summon spirits," he said. "But it can't create art. Art is about intent, Yumi. A rainbow isn't art, beautiful though it might be. Art is about *creation*. Human creation. A machine can lift way more than Tojin can—doesn't make it less impressive when he lifts more than almost any human being."

He smiled at her. "I don't care how well a machine piles rocks. The fact that *you* do it is what matters to me."

She smiled back, brushing her hand against his, causing their arms to radiate warmth. But then they reached the scholars' tent. It was time. The machine wasn't in its place out front, but they often rolled it into the tent for brief maintenance. As the group arrived, the lead scholar—Painter couldn't remember his name—was stepping out, wearing his tall hat. He froze when he noticed them all.

"Scholars," Painter said. "By the authority of the spirits themselves, we have come to destroy your machine. Step aside."

The scholar cocked his head, then called into the tent.

"Sunjun! They're here!"

Sunjun, the most engineering-minded of the scholars, popped out of the tent. "Already?"

"Indeed," the lead scholar said. "Looks like it's time for a confrontation."

Sunjun sighed, then took out some device and activated it. Painter couldn't see what it did, but this wasn't the reaction he'd been hoping for. They didn't seem frightened, or even surprised. More… regretful. Perhaps they were stalling. Honam poked his head out of the tent, then handed the lead scholar something. A pair of goggles. He affixed them to his face, then looked at Painter.

"Stand aside," Painter said. "And relinquish the machine."

The lead scholar instead studied him. "So," the man said. "This is the descendant of the nomads. You've done quite well for yourselves, as a people. Tell me. What is it you think is happening here, boy? The division between our nations? The fact that you have entire cities nearby that can't visit ours?"

Painter froze.

They knew?

He felt cold. Yumi pulled closer to him, and the scholar looked at her, *seeing* her. It was the goggles maybe?

Painter swallowed. The bailiff and the others had frozen. Even Liyun just stood there. Completely motionless. Were they waiting for something from him? Their orders were to go in and destroy the machine if the scholars refused to surrender it. Yet nobody moved.

"Different dimensions," Painter finally said to the scholars. "That overlap somehow. That's what's going on. We exist in the same space, but can't see each other or interact, except in specific ways."

"Oh, that's an *excellent* theory," the lead scholar said. "You hear that, Sunjun?"

"Sure did," Sunjun said as the two other scholars rolled their machine out of the tent, onto a large plank that sloped to the stone ground. "The theory has problems, but it's pretty good for a kid without any real context. He'd have made a good scholar."

"Indeed," the lead scholar said.

"Doesn't matter," Painter said, pointing. "Bailiff, take that machine."

"Painter," Yumi said, "maybe we should get more information first."

"First," he said, "we at least…" He trailed off, noticing that the bailiff, the city officials… Liyun, Hwanji, and Chaeyung were all just standing there. He noticed for the first time that their immobility seemed unnatural. They weren't even blinking.

"Liyun?" Painter asked. "Chaeyung?"

"I regret to be the one to reveal it," the lead scholar said, "but you have *no idea* what is happening here, child."

Painter seized Liyun by the arm, shaking it. And her very shape—clothing included—began to *shift*. Darkening. Giving off wisps of blackness. She looked at him, and her eyes had gone white. Like… like holes drilled in her head.

Painter screamed, his voice joining Yumi's own cry. He jumped away, wiping his hand on his tobok.

"What did you *think* they were?" the lead scholar asked as the machine started up.

Painter, desperate, grabbed a rock. He rushed the machine, but the scholar grabbed his arm. Contrary to what Painter had assumed before, this man was *strong*. In desperation, Painter slammed his rock against the man's head.

The scholar's head shifted, its color bleeding away before darkness, his eyes becoming ivory bores into eternity.

"No," Painter said, pulling out of the thing's grip. "You too?"

"I'm afraid so," the lead scholar—nightmare—said.

"Painter!" Yumi cried, backing up toward him, cowering as the entire *landscape* began to change. Buildings turning black, giving off wisps of smoke. The ground. Even the light in the sky darkened.

"All along?" Painter asked, pained. "Were they just…puppets? Nightmares, with no thoughts?"

"No, the machine let them be themselves," the lead scholar said, his face distorted, made of shifting wisps of smoke—still wearing goggles, oddly. "It's what happens when it needs us. It's hard though. To walk the line between the memory of what we were and the reality of what we have become. They have to be kept from understanding their natures. Otherwise there are…complications."

The thing that had been Liyun turned toward them, and her form took on a lupine cast. With spiked sides, inky darkness. Painter recognized this thing; it was the stable nightmare he'd been hunting.

Liyun was the *stable nightmare*.

Unlike the scholar, she suddenly appeared to have no memory of who she'd been—or who Painter was. She prowled toward him, going down on all fours, growing to enormous size.

Painter tried to stand between it and Yumi. "You won't take her."

The thing stopped, and for the briefest moment seemed to recognize him.

"Child," the lead scholar-nightmare said. "What is it you think you're protecting?"

He froze, and his heart became ice. He turned to find Yumi had fallen to her knees. She was distorting—far less than the others, but still twisting, her skin turning to smoke. She looked at him, horror warping her features in an unnatural way.

"No…" he whispered. *No.*

He…he couldn't think.

Yumi. Yumi…

"Nikaro," she said, her voice hoarse. "I… What is happening…to me…"

"Tragic," the lead scholar said, stepping forward and seizing Painter by the arm. "I admit, this was

an excellent ploy by the spirits. Connect one of the girls to an outsider to anchor her soul? Prevent us from altering her memories? It might have worked."

He heaved Painter back, slamming him against the machine, where the other scholars—also having become nightmares—were tweaking it.

"I'm sorry this took us so long to do," the creature in front of Painter said. "The delay makes it more cruel, I understand. Regrettably, this machine needed to charge up—our power source didn't work. And beyond that, some rogue spirits had to be captured. How they escaped is…distressing. Thank you for helping us return them to their prison."

"Please," Painter said, then reached toward Yumi, his heart wrenching at the sight of her huddled on the ground in a fetal position of pure terror. Darkness streamed off her as she clawed at her arms, as if to tear her own skin off. "*Please.* Let me help her."

"The machine is lord now," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

The scholar nodded to the others, his hollow eyes expanding. They turned some switch on their machine, and Painter felt a surge of *coldness* wash through him. Followed by a distinct, terrible *snap*.

Whatever it was that had linked him to Yumi broke. Painter felt himself hurled away from the scene. They shrank, and he smashed into a blackness—like he'd plunged into the ocean. Only he was still moving, an arrow in flight.

Darkness.

Hion lines like a flash.

A blur of buildings.

Then *slam*. He hit something.

Incredible pain followed, coursing through him, accompanied by sickening pops and a sound like leather being stretched. When it finally subsided he found himself lying in his apartment, covered in sweat.

Once again occupying his own body.

With Yumi nowhere in sight.

YUMI HAD ALWAYS considered the appearance of the daystar to be a good sign. An omen that the primal hijo would be open and welcoming this day. In fact, the star seemed extra bright today—glowing with a soft blue light on the western horizon as the sun rose in the east.

A powerful sign, if you believed in such things. There's an old joke that mentions that lost items tend to always be in the last place you look for them. Strangely, by converse, omens tend to appear in the first place people look for them. (Even if you're doing so for the second time.)

Yumi did believe in omens. She had to, as an omen had been the single most important event in her life. One that had appeared right after her birth, marking her as chosen by the spirits. She settled herself on the warm ground as her attendants, Hwanji and Chaeyung, entered. They bowed in ritual postures, then fed her with maipon sticks and spoons—a meal of rice and a stew that had been left on a hotspot outside to cook.

Yumi sat and ate, not being so crass as to try to feed herself. This was a ritual, and she was an expert in those. Though she couldn't help feeling distracted. Today marked one hundred days until the big festival in Torio City, the seat of the queen. And this was also nineteen days past her nineteenth birthday.

A day for decisions. A day for action.

A day to, maybe, ask for what she wanted?

First she had duties. Once her attendants had finished feeding her, she rose and went to the door of her private wagon. As they opened the door for her, she took a deep breath, then stepped down into her shoes.

Immediately her two attendants leaped to hold up enormous fans to obscure her from view.

Naturally, people in the village had gathered to see her. The Chosen. The yoki-hijo. The girl of commanding primal spirits. (Yes, it still works better in their language.)

This land—Torio—had a dominant red-orange sun the color of baked clay. Bigger and closer than your sun, it had distinct spots of varied color on it—like a boiling stew, churning and undulating in the sky.

This bloody sun painted the landscape…well, just ordinary colors. The way the brain works, once you'd been there a few hours, you wouldn't have noticed that the light was redder than yours. But when you first arrived, it would look striking. Like clay fresh from a potter's kiln and bearing a distinct molten heat.

Hidden behind her fans, Yumi walked on clogged feet through the village to the local cold spring. Here she put her hands to the sides and let her attendants undress her for…

For…

She cocked her head. Something was…odd about this experience. Something was wrong. Wasn't it?

Something was *missing*.

She opened her mouth to ask, then bit her tongue. Speaking to Hwanji and Chaeyung now would shame them. Yet as the bathing progressed, she felt oddly out of sorts. She found herself glancing at the side of the cool spring, expecting…

Someone is supposed to be there, she thought, incongruously. That would be *terrible*. Shaming. Why would she want someone to watch her bathe?

Instead she closed her eyes and let her attendants continue their work.

PAINTER SCATTERED HIS stack of rocks in frustration. As with his previous attempts, the shroud remained immobile. A wall of mottled black, indifferent to his inferior stacking.

Painter tried to meditate, as Yumi had always taught. He found any semblance of calm impossible, as closing his eyes only made him think of her huddling in terror, looking at him, pleading as the horror consumed her.

He still couldn't make sense of any of it. Was it some kind of trick played by the scholars? That couldn't have been Yumi…Yumi *couldn't* be a nightmare…

If she was, what did that mean? Had he fallen for someone created by his own…his own perceptions? Like a painter loving his own painting?

No. No, she'd been real. She *was* real.

And he was going to help her.

Somehow.

Painter forced his eyes open and grabbed his sack of rocks, collected in haste on his way to the shroud. He calmed his frantic breathing and started stacking, and each stone placed reminded him of her. Yumi would have been proud of the twelve-stone height he obtained, and the way he chose rocks of irregular size, looking to make not only a pile, but a tower.

The shroud didn't move. Though it had bowed for her, it didn't notice him. Painter was forced to admit the truth. Yumi had been special. Being yoki-hijo wasn't merely about stacking rocks, but about the power the spirits had given her. He could do nothing to disrupt the shroud without being Connected to her, just as he could never have attracted spirits without being Connected to her.

He sank back onto his heels, slumping his shoulders.

"Please," he whispered. "Just let me see her. Let me help her…"

"Nikaro?" a voice asked.

He turned with a start to see Akane walking past. She'd stopped, staring at him. "Nikaro," she said (lowly), striding toward him. "Where have you been? It feels like…" She frowned, seeing his face. "Have you been crying?"

He stumbled to his feet, knocking over the stack of rocks.

"Nikaro?" Akane demanded. "What have you *done*? Where is Yumi?"

Unable to face those condemnations, he grabbed his sack of rocks, then turned and fled, running through the night.

A SHORT TIME later, Yumi's attendants led her to the shrine among some floating trees, knocking together. Here, once more, Yumi hesitated. This was…familiar. Why was it familiar? She'd never been to this town before. She moved to a new one each night.

Her attendants halted, looking worried but not speaking, lest they shame her. So she continued forward. But again she was shocked, to see someone standing at the shrine.

"Liyun?" Yumi asked, stopping. The woman didn't usually first approach until after Yumi had done her prayers and meditations. "Is something wrong?"

"I just wanted to let you know, Chosen," Liyun said, bowing, "that we passed Ihosen and came here instead."

"Ihosen?"

"The town we were going to visit? This is the next in line." Liyun put her hand to her head. "I… can't remember why we changed. I thought I should mention it."

"It is, of course, wisdom in you," Yumi said, bowing—though she mostly just felt confused. Why did Liyun think to inform her? The woman never mentioned other towns they visited.

"I wanted to tell you," Liyun said, "that I might not be here later tonight to guide you. Go, do your service, and then have the attendants escort you to the wagon."

"Liyun?" Yumi asked. "Protocol…"

"I know, Chosen," Liyun said, bowing reverently. "Unfortunately, I've been called to do something else. I don't fully remember what, but it is important. Someone must be…dealt with. So do your duty, and I will see you tomorrow."

Yumi bowed. Then she rose and watched Liyun hurry away. What an odd interaction. Why—

Liyun paused, then glanced back. She looked like she wanted to say something, then cocked her head as if she'd forgotten it.

She was gone moments later.

Yumi realized she hadn't been able to ask for the thing she wanted most. To visit Torio City for the festival. That would be…

Hollow? Why would she suddenly feel that to be hollow? She'd been planning to ask for that trip for weeks. Yet now she couldn't muster the effort to care.

She decided that perhaps she was abandoning her selfish streak. At long last, she might be becoming the yoki-hijo that Liyun had always wanted her to be.

She knelt to begin her prayers. Content that, with effort, she might finally be able to serve with her whole heart.

PAINTER SAT ON his floor, huddled in his blankets, staring at a stack of plates, cups, and utensils that Yumi had made a day before.

He pulled the blankets close because warmth felt right to him in a way it never had before. Because the last time someone had held these blankets, it had been her. Sitting with him. Watching the viewer and caring *way* too much about the lives of fictional people.

Maybe, he thought, *I can get a hion expander and go striking out in the shroud.* He could hunt for those walls that circled her towns. And…and do what? Be surrounded and killed by nightmares?

He didn't even know what her towns *were*. Masaka had said those walls were impenetrable, but Painter had apparently been living half his time inside one. He was so far beyond his depth that he couldn't see the surface.

The scholar had been right. Painter didn't have *any idea* what was going on anymore.

Except that he had lost Yumi.

No. I won't let it be forever. He stood up as an idea struck him. A very terrible idea. He followed it anyway and left the apartment, the sack of rocks over his shoulder and something special tucked into his pocket.

Nightmares often returned to the place where they'd last fed. Looking for another easy meal, perhaps. Or just working by instinct and following the same emotions that had led them to prey the time before. Painter gambled on this, and returned to the broken playground near the carnival.

Here he settled down to wait. Determined. And frightened, though more of what he might lose than of nightmares. So he was *relieved* when he saw something darkening the alley nearby.

He'd been right. He stood up, feeling exhausted as the nightmare flowed from the alley, slicing the

ground with thick claws. It approached him, careful, perhaps remembering their last encounter.

"We first met before the swap happened," he said to the thing. "Was that a coincidence, or were you looking for me even then?"

It reared up, blackness so deep it could only be imagined. Eyes of scraped-out hollow white. It reached for him.

"Liyun," he whispered. Remembering the lupine form she'd taken during the confrontation with the scholars.

The thing froze, then crouched close to the ground.

"Have they taken your memory, Liyun?" he asked. "But why?"

The answer struck him immediately—remembered words of the scholars leading him to a single conclusion.

They were afraid of Yumi.

"Is that what is happening?" Painter said. "Are the towns some kind of…charade for *her* benefit? To keep her confused, or disoriented, or simply placid?"

The nightmare began to slink forward again. So Painter knelt and began to stack. As earlier, his stacks were impressive for him—though not nearly on Yumi's level. But he felt proud as he placed the stones. And as he'd hoped, the nightmare that was Liyun stopped once more. Drill-hole eyes fixated on the stacks.

"I know," he said, "I don't have whatever power or endowment was given to Yumi. Yet I saw you recognize me before—even after someone had robbed you of your shape and your mind. A piece of you is still Liyun. Perhaps the deepest, most important piece. That's what the scholar said. That you were allowed to be yourself again for a time. When with Yumi."

The thing stepped forward, its eyes fixed on the stack.

"Remember, Liyun," Painter whispered. "*Remember.*"

The beast—hulking, like a boulder of black smoke—reached out a claw toward the stack. But stopped before touching it.

"I remember," it whispered in Liyun's voice.

"Is she all right?" Painter asked, pained.

"She forgets," the thing said. "As we all forget…"

"That," Painter said, "is why I brought this."

He took something from his pocket. A piece of paper, painted with a beginner's skill. It depicted two hands, overlapping each other, above a sea of lights. Yumi's memory, for him, of her.

He bowed before the beast that was Liyun. "Can you give this to her?"

"I will forget. I…"

"Liyun," he said, intent. "Do you remember your duty?"

Those white holes fixated on him.

"Serve the yoki-hijo," Painter whispered. "Protect her. *Give her this.*"

"I want to be a person again," Liyun whispered. "So badly. It has been so long…"

"How…long?" Painter asked.

"Since before your people made cities," the thing whispered. "Since the days when this land had a sun. Centuries."

The weight of that hit Painter. Centuries.

Yes, it meant Yumi had been right. Kind of. They hadn't been time traveling. But these people had somehow been trapped, unchanging, for *seventeen hundred* years.

"Yumi…" he whispered. "She'd lost memories. But only one day."

"One day," the monster whispered. "Over, and over, and over, and over. That same day, erased each night, so she can live it again the next. For centuries. Millennia…"

It reached out, delicate, and pinched the sheet between two claws. "I have failed to kill you," it whispered. "But the machine will not make this mistake again. It will send one who does not know you, who cannot be influenced. With that one will come an army."

"What…kind of army?"

"There was a city once," Liyun whispered. "I remember wisps of it, as I travel here to feed, to try to remember. Whenever the machine lets go of us, we come to your land, to seek ourselves. Futinoro. You know that name?"

"A city," Painter whispered, "that was destroyed entirely by stable nightmares."

"It happened because the spirits managed to contact the people there," the monster said. "The machine ordered the city wiped out as a result, to prevent anyone from knowing the truth. It sent dozens of my kind to achieve it. I was there. In a dream, I was there."

Painter sat back and released a long breath, his eyes wide. They'd assumed that failure had come from the painters not doing their jobs. But if it instead had been a direct assault…

That changed everything. He snapped his attention back to the beast. "They're coming here?"

"From the west," Liyun said. "A hundred nightmares. Strong as I am. Fed by the machine to make them dangerous and stable. Flee. Flee and pray to the spirits."

Her eyes lingered again on the stack, and then she withdrew, taking his picture with her.

YUMI DREAMED.

And had nightmares.

Yes. The irony is so thick, you could spread it on your toast. Don't focus on that. Focus on what she heard. Because unlike most nightmares, this one was only sounds.

Voice one: "She's breaking through the patch."

Voice two: "Strengthen it."

Voice three: "We should cut these memories out with the machine. All of them, stretching back the entire month."

Voice two: "We don't have the strength for that. And if we did, she'd notice. It would upset the balance."

Voice one: "And if she breaks through?"

Voice two: "We deal with her, then try again."

And…after that…nothing…

Yumi awoke feeling exhausted, which was not a good sign. But the daystar was out, bright in the sky. And she'd always considered its appearance to be a good sign. An omen that the primal hijo would be open and welcoming today.

There's an old joke that mentions lost items always being in the last place you look for them. It doesn't say anything about memories though. Those, once lost, are the sorts of things you don't even know to look for.

Yumi stretched, then settled herself on the warm floor to wait for her attendants.

Who never came.

Eventually Liyun opened the door, looking frazzled, her hair messy and her bow untied. Yumi was shocked. Liyun breaking protocol? They'd done the exact same thing for what seemed like forever. Now Liyun came to her door before Yumi even had breakfast?

"The town," Liyun said, "is sick."

"Sick," Yumi said. "The *entire town*?"

"Yes," Liyun said, then put her hand to her head. "I…don't remember how I discovered it. But something has happened, and…and you need to remain inside today. In prayer and meditation. Yes, that is what you need to do."

Yumi leaped to her feet. Was this her chance? Protocol broken. Could she ask? Strangely, she found her timidity completely absent. Though she'd worried for weeks about even asking, now it came out easily.

"I," she said, "would like to visit Torio City for the festival in a hundred days. You will see that it is arranged?"

What was (lowly) wrong with her? To say it that way? So forceful? To make *demands* of Liyun? Surely the spirits would strike her down this instant for such an act!

"Yes, all right," Liyun said absently. "As you wish, Chosen. Is that all?"

Yumi gaped. No lecture couched in questions? No glare of anger? Maybe everyone *was* sick in this town, and Liyun had caught it. She certainly appeared disoriented.

"I will…" Liyun said. "I will get you breakfast myself. Where did Hwanji and Chaeyung go? Yes, breakfast. I…"

She walked to the door, then stopped.

"Liyun?" Yumi asked.

"What is my duty?" the older woman asked.

"To guide the yoki-hijo."

"Yes, yes," Liyun said, then moved to step down into her clogs. Again she halted. "But that is not all, is it?" She moved her arm with a stiffness that made Yumi think it was pained. She reached into the pouch at her belt. And took out a folded piece of paper.

Liyun stared at it, then dropped it to the floor of the wagon and fled out the door in a rush.

What extraordinarily odd behavior. Yumi walked over to watch Liyun leave through a town that seemed completely empty. Not a soul to be seen. Even the crops were unattended.

Was the sickness *that bad*? No wonder Liyun was so worried. Yumi knelt to say a prayer to the spirits, then saw the piece of paper.

Painted paper.

She cocked her head, then spread it out.

Those two hands…

One was hers.

One was…*his*.

Memories assaulted her with the force of a collapsing tower of stones a hundred feet high.

PAINTER COUNTED BUILDING numbers in a frenzy, hoping to the depth of his core that he remembered correctly. Hion lines behind him cast his shadow, doubled, against the door as he reached the appropriate house.

He pounded on the door. Then pounded again, after not waiting long enough. He'd raised his fist to pound a third time when the door opened. Judging by the formal painter's uniform—with a tighter

coat than he wore, short in the front, and made of a vibrant blue—he'd come to the right place. Painter had made an educated guess as to where the Dreamwatch would be put up. They rated an entire house, and the Painter Department owned only a few of those.

"Stable nightmare," Painter said between breaths. "I…ran…all the way…"

"Oh, you saw it, did you?" the man at the door said. Tall, he had such an incredible beard that it made sense he was bald—the hair on the top had been intimidated into hiding. His coat indicated he was a companion—not a Dreamwatch member himself, but one of those chosen by a full member to be on the team. The role that Painter's friends had hoped to fill.

The companion opened the door with a yawn and waved Painter in. Painter had worried that the Dreamwatch would all be out scouring the city for the stable nightmare, but he appeared to be in luck. They were in, perhaps holding a strategy session or interviewing contacts.

Even with everything that was happening, Painter felt a thrill at being ushered into their headquarters. Even this little brush with their world was awe-inspiring—more so when he stepped into the main lounge of the building and saw not one, but *three* full Dreamwatch members. Dressed in black, marks of their stations sewn into their jackets. Painter couldn't help staring.

They were playing table tennis. Two of them at least, a man and a woman. The third one lounged in a seat near the viewer, watching *Seasons of Regret*. Various companions lounged around the room, doing what Painter imagined was official work. Reading. Keeping score for the ping-pong game. Um…taking naps…

Relaxing, Painter told himself, *between bouts of hard work.* He had explained to Yumi the value of that.

The woman at the game table glanced up as he entered. "Was that the food, Hikiri? I ordered the barbecued…" She frowned, noting Painter.

"He says he saw the stable nightmare," Painter's guide explained. "Ran all this way to tell us."

"Oh," she said, and seemed disappointed that he hadn't brought her food. "Well, that's good. Take his statement, Hikiri. Put a pin in the map. Do we have the map set up yet?"

"Getting to it," said the companion who was reading a novel at the side of the room. "I've got it in my pack somewhere."

"Well, write down the address where he saw it," the Dreamwatch member said, then turned back to her game.

Painter took a deep breath, then stepped forward. "There's a hundred of them coming, sir," he said. "The nightmare told me. An invasion of nightmares. Like what happened in Futinoro. From the west. Please, you *must* defend the city!"

The woman glanced at her two colleagues. The one playing table tennis with her rolled his eyes. The other kept staring at the viewer.

"An army of nightmares," ping-pong woman said, strolling over to him.

"Please believe me," he said. "*Please.*"

She nodded to his jacket. "You're a painter?"

"Yes. I was the one who found the stable nightmare in the first place."

"You look like a real go-getter," she said. "Interested in the Dreamwatch, eh?"

"All my life," he said. "I tried so hard to get in. I'm…not good enough. That's why we need you. To defend the city. They're coming—maybe soon!"

"We'll take care of it," she said (highly). "Nice work out there. Thank you for the warning. Keep this up, and you might turn into Dreamwatch material yourself." She gave him a firm pat on the shoulder, then nodded to her bearded companion, who took Painter by the arm and tried to guide him

out the door.

Painter lingered though. The Dreamwatch member turned back to her ping-pong game. Maybe… maybe that was how she meditated.

Now, you've probably caught on more quickly than Painter did here. You might be thinking at this point of the old adage that says having heroes is not worth it. There are variations on it all around the cosmere. Cynical takes that encourage you never to look up to someone, lest by turning your eyes toward the sky you leave your gut open for a nice stabbing.

I disagree. Hope is a grand thing, and having heroes is essential to human aspiration. That is part of why I tell these stories. That said, you *do* need to learn to separate the story—and what it has done to you—from the individual who prompted it. Art—and all stories are art, even the ones about real people—is about what it *does to you*.

The true hero is the one in your mind, the representation of an ideal that makes you a better person. The individual who inspired it, well, they're like the book on the table or the art on the wall. A vessel. A syringe full of transformational aspiration.

Don't force people to live up to your dreams of who they might be. And if you're ever in the situation in which Painter found himself, where your ideals are crumbling, don't do what he did. Don't make it slow. Walk away and patch the wound instead of giving the knife time to twist inside.

"Come on," Hikiri the companion said, pulling him again by the arm. "Let me get your statement."

"Did she mean what she said?" Painter asked. "About me being Dreamwatch material? Could I still join them?"

Hikiri rubbed his temples. (An action he did so often it's a wonder he didn't have calluses there. Such was the life dealing with the Dreamwatch.)

"Do you like being a painter?" Hikiri said softly.

"I guess," Painter said.

"It's a good job," Hikiri said. "Stable. Respected. Not too dangerous. You should enjoy it."

Painter could read the tone of the man's voice and understood. *You have no chance here, kid.* Of course he didn't; he'd known that. He took a deep breath to plead anyway, but something else came out.

"I have friends," he said. "Great painters, loyal. When I was in school, we all thought I'd get into the Dreamwatch. They were going to be my companions, but I let them down. I wasn't good enough. It's always felt unfair to me that they got punished because I couldn't paint well enough. Do you think…there is a way they could be companions still? Are your Dreamwatch soldiers here recruiting?"

Hikiri shook his head, seeming bemused. "You thought you'd get into the Dreamwatch, did you? Were a skilled painter, I assume? Best of your class?"

"So I thought," Painter said. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Hikiri pointed at the woman at the game table. "Do you know who she is?"

Painter shook his head.

"Tesuaka Tatomi," he whispered. "Daughter of the senator?" He pointed at the next. "Son of the main investor of the new wing of the college." The third one, by the viewer. "Old money. He's fourth-generation Dreamwatch."

Fourth-generation? That must be a very skilled family. Or…

Yes, in this regard, Painter was nearly as permeable as a bank vault. But three key cards and one pressure lock later, his eyes widened.

"The Dreamwatch," he whispered, "is about *who you know*?"

"Of course it is," Hikiri said, finally steering Painter away. "It's the most prestigious position in the painters. It's more appointment than it is job." He looked regretful as he said it. Those were the eyes of a man who had seen more than one young person hurl themselves at a target that, unbeknownst to them, was behind bulletproof glass.

"Then who fights the stable nightmares?" Painter asked.

"They do," Hikiri said. "Just with plenty of help from companions who do a lot of training." He smiled comfortingly to Painter. "You and your friends have good jobs. Enjoy that. We'll get around to hunting your stable nightmare soon."

"But the army of nightmares," Painter said. "They *are* coming, Hikiri. I…"

Hikiri didn't believe him. Of course he didn't. Why would he believe something so outlandish? Painter tried to think of some proof, but they'd reached the doorway, and Hikiri firmly pushed him out of it. He nodded to Painter, then shut the door.

I never could have joined them, Painter thought, numb. *No matter how skilled my painting, no matter how hard I worked, I would never have been accepted. I'm a nobody from a small town.*

The others and I…we never even had a chance.

There was a point in Painter's life when this discovery would have been the biggest he'd ever made. But today, it was a pale second to the more daunting realization. That he was completely alone and would have to prevent the destruction of the city by himself.

Chapter 38

YUMI BURST FROM the wagon in her nightgown and clogs, her eyes wild. She remembered. All of it—from the moment she'd woken up with Painter in her body to the day they'd taken him away. The last thirty days were clear in her mind.

Ironically, that was the only part of her life that made any sense. What was she? Was any of it real? She could feel warm sunlight on her skin, see the twirling plants high in the sky. The air was wet from the steamwell, the smell of sulfur lingering. What, if any of this, could she trust?

She searched through the empty town. Where was everyone? Why did it feel like the empty set of a drama after the actors had gone home? Finally, she scooped up a rock and went stalking toward the place of ritual, clogs slapping stone.

It was time to try Painter's idea. Find the machine. Hit it hard. Hope something vital broke. But when she reached the place of ritual, there was no tent. No scholars. No machine. Had that part all been fake too?

No, she thought, turning about. *The machine actually did something to Painter. It was here.*

Perhaps they'd carted it away. Yet in her dreams she'd heard them talking—saying they might need to use the machine on her. They'd keep it close, wouldn't they?

She lowered her stone. Then started walking through the walls of buildings.

It worked. Those walls weren't actually real. *She* wasn't actually real. Both were made of…well, whatever nightmares were made of. The rock she carried, however, seemed to really be a rock—at least, it resisted the first time she walked through a wall. As she tugged harder and pulled it through, the wall briefly distorted into amorphous smoke, then returned to looking like cut stones mortared with geyser mud.

Her search didn't take long. There were only so many buildings in the town; she strode straight through them, one after another, until she found the machine hidden inside the bailiff's home. The terrible, many-armed device continued quietly doing its work—a mere two arms stacking rocks, but the entire thing vibrating with a soft energy.

The scholars were here. Four nightmares with only the vaguest human shapes. Like shadows on a very cloudy day, indistinct, melding with the darkness in corners and beneath furniture. As she entered, they turned toward her with shocked postures, which gave her a moment to act.

She dashed forward and swung her rock at the place on the machine where she'd seen them power it on before, that day that seemed so long ago, when she and Painter had flown on a tree to escape. She smashed her rock down over and over, using both hands, breaking the latch on the front, exposing the internal mechanism. She crushed this, screaming, sweating, venting a lifetime's worth of stress. Like steam suddenly released after nineteen years of building beneath the ground.

The machine let out a whine, almost like it was in pain. Glowing white smoke erupted from the front where she'd pounded it. Then the legs locked up, the vibrations ceased, and the lights glowing from within it extinguished.

Yumi dropped the stone and fell to her knees. It was done.

"What," the lead scholar asked, "do you think you are doing, child?"

"Fulfilling the wishes of the spirits," she said. "Ending this machine. Saving us."

"You think…*that* is the machine?" the scholar asked. Though he had no mouth, the shadow of his head moved and distorted as he spoke. "Child. That little thing is not what rules us. It is but a bud compared to the tree."

Yumi slumped down. A part of her had known, after all. She'd heard them talking before, and could piece it together. There was another machine. The father machine.

"Where?" she asked.

The lead scholar didn't reply. He stalked forward, joined by the others. Yet she realized she knew.

"It's in Torio City, isn't it?" Yumi asked. "The festival. Did you turn it on during the festival?"

Another of the scholars spoke up, tentatively. "One thousand seven hundred and sixty-three years. Yes…festival day. The day we would create power for our people from the spirits themselves."

"And yet," another said, "it instead drew power from us. From our souls. From the lives of our people."

"And thus," another said, holding up a smoky hand, "we became these."

Seventeen hundred years? Yumi reeled, trying to comprehend that. "But…where did hion come from?" she whispered. "So much of this is confusing. How much of my world was real, and how much fake? What even *are* we?"

All four turned to her, as if seeing her anew. Their darkness lengthened, their white eyes glowing. They went from willowy shadows to full nightmares in a smooth transition.

"No!" Yumi said. "Don't let the machine control you! We can stop it."

"Why?" the lead scholar asked.

"We created it," another said.

"It is our purpose."

"Our energy."

"Our *art*."

As they spoke, their figures blended together, their voices losing individuality. Though she'd been able to tell them apart at first—hearing in their voices the men she'd spied on in the tent—now they just became nightmares.

“It is life.”

“All obey. All souls.”

“All of us.”

“Except…” one said, hesitating.

Again all of them fixated on her.

“Except for the yoki-hijo,” one whispered. “All obey the machine. Except…those who are too powerful. Except those who have been blessed by the spirits. You it cannot control. You, it must keep captive instead.”

Emotion welled up inside Yumi. It meant…it meant she was real. Or had been real, until that day centuries ago when they’d activated the machine. When they’d brought the shroud and hion alike. It meant that she was herself, but somehow centuries old? Still, that daunted her.

“My memories…” she whispered.

“Scrubbed each day,” the nightmares hissed in unison. “You’ve lived nearly two thousand years in the same town, Yumi. Doing the same things. Thinking the same thoughts. You are both incredibly old and eternally naive.”

“And now that you do not accept our treatment—”

“—more extreme measures must be taken.”

Their eyes widened, white bores directly through them. Their forms darkened further. As they rose and began to move toward her purposefully.

Yumi ran.

ALL RIGHT. At this point, some of you might be confused.

If so, you're in good company. Because all of this confused the hell out of me when it began. Let me go over it again, laying out the threads as I've been able to gather them. Together they might present for you a tapestry of understanding.

Seventeen hundred years before our story started, a machine was activated at the great Torish festival of the spirits. Not the tiny machine you've seen; that was a prototype. The real machine was something far greater. Scholars had crafted it to stack stones, attract spirits, and then use them as a power source.

They'd miscalculated, however, because the machine saw *all* souls—not just the spirits that lived beneath the ground—as a viable power source. When first turned on, it was *hungry*. It needed strength to follow its instructions to stack stones, and it wanted an overwhelming amount of power to jump-start its work. No spirits were available. So it instead reached out and seized the nearest sources it could find: the souls of the people of Torio.

Let this be a lesson. When you Awaken a device like this, be very, *very* careful what Commands you give it to follow.

This machine immediately began feeding on them, destroying their bodies and harvesting their Investiture. The result was the shroud, sprayed into the air, left to rain down and blanket the land. A dark miasma literally crafted from the dead, everyone's Identities evaporated and transformed into this dark force. Imagine it like…the tar that decomposed bodies sometimes turn into over many years of incredible pressure. The shroud is that, except souls, left as refuse from the machine's initial activation.

A soul cannot be destroyed; it can only change forms. The machine, then, didn't use people up so much as transform them. They lingered as this blackness, a churning soup made of tens of thousands of souls subject to the machine's domineering will, held in eternal bondage to something they'd created.

Delightful, eh? Progress, it is said, always disrupts one industry or another. Well, in Torio, progress took a running leap—and instead of just disrupting industry, decided to disrupt the entire planet. Permanently.

Before long, the machine burned through the relatively weak souls of humans and moved on to the spirits themselves. Drawn by the machine's incredible stacking abilities, the spirits were handily trapped by its power. It eventually gathered each and every remaining free spirit in the land. They finally satiated it, providing a more…vigorous power source. That was its purpose, and the thing fulfilled it with excellence.

Unfortunately, there was almost no one left to appreciate it.

Only wandering refugees who survived the machine's initial activation—nomads from the edge of civilization. Lucky survivors who eventually came across the results of the machine's efforts: hion stubs provided in some of the former locations of Torish towns. The blood of enslaved spirits, hidden away, the source of this power never understood.

PAINTER STEPPED ALONE up to the shroud, holding his painter's bag with sweaty fingers, watching the shifting darkness. This was the west side of town—where the nightmares would come. It was near his patrol route—the place where Yumi had once pushed back the darkness ever so briefly.

When the nightmares arrived, they would find only him. A single painter.

He trembled, knowing how it would play out. A rush of dark things surrounding him. If he worked frantically, perhaps he could lock down one of them before he was killed. Perhaps even two or three. Then they would rip him apart. Leave him in pieces, like in the stories of what had happened to the painters of Futinoro.

After he was dead, the nightmares would descend upon the unsuspecting city. Rampaging. Maybe…maybe the Dreamwatch would recognize what was happening. Maybe they'd resist. But…but after meeting them, he had to acknowledge how frail a hope that was. How many people would die tonight because he hadn't been able to persuade the Dreamwatch?

He bowed his head.

Then thought, *What am I (lowly) doing?*

This was stupid. There was another way.

Yumi's way.

YOU STILL HAVE questions, don't you?

All right, let's delve a little deeper. Let me show you a few events again—but this time through the eyes of someone *other* than Yumi or Painter. Someone who had been involved in both stories from the beginning.

Here I must admit to you that I've lied about one crucial item. Remember how I told you I'd been hearing voices, seeing flashes of images—sometimes as full pictures, sometimes just as lines that quivered in my vision? Glimpses of events as they unfolded through Painter's or Yumi's eyes? Well, that part is true, but it wasn't the whole truth.

There's a *third* person whose eyes I'd been seeing through.

Liyun.

In fact, for me, this story began with her. Baffling flashes of her life. (I think that the spirits were watching Liyun in particular. Then some irregularities about my…specific nature tapped into the Spiritual communication, letting me see what was happening.)

The machine evaporated the population of Torio, feeding upon their power and spitting out the shroud as a byproduct. Well, as Yumi and Painter had both guessed (despite lacking all the information), there were some people the machine couldn't harvest or control: the yoki-hijo.

They were superficially killed during the machine's initial activation like everyone else. However, after a short time these fourteen souls pulled themselves free of the shroud and *re-formed*. They came back from the dead, refusing to be controlled.

All fourteen women were beings of incredible willpower. Highly Invested at birth by the spirits, they presented a legitimate threat to the machine. It could not harvest their energy and could not keep them contained in the shroud. The most the machine could do to them was siphon off a tiny bit of their memories.

So, to control them, it created prisons in the form of fake towns. Servants, compelled by the machine, emerged from the shroud. Buildings, plants, and vehicles were recreated from the substance of souls, and a careful perimeter was erected. The walls Masaka found? Those projected (by making images out of the shroud) a perfectly realistic, yet fake landscape.

These places were fourteen nature preserves, you might say, each designed for a single occupant. The yoki-hijo were placed into these prisons, with their memories erased each night. Then they were given a single day to live over and over, calling fake spirits formed from the shroud.

A clunky system, yes, but it worked. For centuries it kept these extremely dangerous souls captive not by force of arm, but by pure force of *mundanity*.

Their keepers were the souls of those they had once known. Best I can tell, Liyun spent the last seventeen centuries or so living the same day over and over. She was exactly as presented. That was her, the actual person, the exact soul that raised Yumi. Released from the shroud, partially controlled by the machine, partially given self-governance.

Liyun was one of hundreds of souls forced into this strange half life. Their memories were, of course, erased each day—but I think part of them understood that something was wrong. Because each night, while the yoki-hijo slept, the machine would let its will slacken. Its attention no longer on these servants, they would lose their shape and sense of self, becoming vague blobs of blackness.

Each night, during this time of slumber, some of these servants would break free. They'd stalk the land, ghosts without memories, on a prowling search for meaning. For understanding. For *life*. And like most unbound Investiture—like the spirits themselves—the souls of the dead were drawn to the imaginations of the living.

These nightmares forgot how to be people when not compelled directly by the machine. But they longed, *lusted*, for the lives they'd lost. Maddened by their state of half-existence, they'd sneak into cities, hunting dreaming minds with powerful imaginations. There, Painter and his kind would trap them into some semblance of physicality and banish them back to the shroud—where the machine, each day, would recycle them again and set them to work in its prisons.

This was Liyun's life. The machine didn't mind that she prowled at night as a nightmare; why would it? The job was done, the yoki-hijo contained. Theoretically. A curious aspect of machines, even ones partially Awakened like this one: They don't *plan*. They don't think about the future. Most machines can only react to the state of things in the now.

Therefore it didn't, couldn't, account for Yumi spending *centuries* perfecting her art. Yes, her

memories were wiped each day, but something remained. Muscle memory. Skills that sank in deep, infusing her soul, like rum in a cake. Her skill couldn't be separated from her; she had earned it.

So it was that on the day our story began, something remarkable occurred. Seventeen hundred years of repeating the same day, and something finally snapped. Because Yumi, her skill reaching a crescendo, stacked so well that she pulled a single spirit *away* from the machine.

This changed everything.

That spirit, grateful for a moment of freedom, yet knowing it would soon be captured again, contacted her. Looking for a way out. At the same time, Liyun—unnerved—*knew* something strange had happened with Yumi. She went hunting that night as a nightmare, stronger than she'd ever been before. And the briefly freed spirit watched her, followed her, until she encountered Painter.

He wasn't anyone special, at least on paper. Yes, he was of above-average painting skill, but that wasn't what drew the attention of the spirit. Instead it was the fact that he saved the life of a young boy.

Turns out that was enough; the spirit found in him the soul of a hero. It wasn't the boasts, the pretending, the superficial actions. It was the fact that when he could have just headed home to relax, he'd instead turned back. To protect the people of Kilahito, even when he didn't feel like it.

You know the rest. Painter and Yumi linked. And Liyun? Her disquiet grew. She escaped each night, prowling Kilahito, searching for her yoki-hijo. She didn't know who she was during these times—only that there was a Connection driving her to search for this young woman. She absolutely had tried to kill Yumi when she had found her after the carnival, and she might actually have managed it. This wouldn't have solved the machine's problems, as then Liyun would have absorbed all that power and become a danger. But it would have ended Yumi's problems, technically—by leaving her dead.

You'll have to forgive Liyun for the near-murder of someone she loved and was sworn to protect. She wasn't feeling like herself at the time—in fact, she hadn't felt like herself for seventeen hundred years.

YUMI SCRAMBLED THROUGH the town, frenzied, hunted. Remembering that unyielding coldness from the night when the monster—Liyun—had nearly absorbed her. Yumi felt echoes of that icy death. Like she'd been submerged, sinking far, far, far from the heat and light.

The four scholars, no longer the least bit recognizable, followed her. Nightmares on the prowl, hideous creations from the dreams of people's deepest torments. Shaped by fears, given substance by the terrible machine. She couldn't outrun them. She couldn't paint them, not without tools. Would they respond to stacking? Would she even get a chance to put two stones upon one another before they reached her?

She almost tried. But then she thought of a better way.

Painter's way.

She ran for the place of ritual, passing right through the fence. The sound of claws on stone chased her farther, to where the scholars had once kept their tent. Chained behind that spot, to give the tent shade, were several trees.

Yumi leaped for the first of them and pulled out the pin holding its chain to the ground. With a cry, she held on tightly to the tree, her eyes squeezed closed. Anticipating the arrival of the nightmares and the feeling of their claws on her skin.

When it didn't happen, she cracked her eyes and saw four dark shapes on the ground below.

Looking up. Having arrived just a fraction too late for the second time in their lives.

PAINTER FOUND HIS friends in their usual place at Design's restaurant. He blessed his luck. This would have been a terrible night for them to go out for dumplings instead. He stumbled up to their table, then threw himself to his knees and bowed, his head touching the ground.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Stunned silence.

"I know it's late for apologies," he continued. "I realize I hurt you deeply. I…didn't want to do that. Hurting all of you was the *last* thing I wanted. I just couldn't think, couldn't process what had happened until it was too late. And I foolishly kept thinking if I could put it off, I would be able to find some way to prevent you from suffering the terrible loss that I felt."

He continued kneeling, listening to them shuffle, a pair of maipon sticks clinking together as a bowl on the table shifted.

"I know you have no reason to believe me ever again," he said. "You're fully justified in ignoring me. But I'm *trying* to do better, and so I'm going to tell you the absolute truth. These last weeks, I've been interacting with nightmares. They have souls. They're people somehow, from long ago.

"I thought things were going well, but now… Now we're in danger. One of them told me, just a few minutes ago, that a *hundred* of its fellows are coming to Kilahito. To destroy it, like they did to Futinoro. Because of me, and what I know, an army of stable nightmares is on its way to the city right now, and the Dreamwatch won't listen to me.

"I've lied to you in the past. I've hurt you. But this is *not a lie*. Nightmares will destroy everyone in this city unless we stop them. I'm begging for your help. So I don't have to face them alone."

He squeezed his eyes shut, head to the floor, tears dripping to stain the wood.

"You *talked* to a nightmare," Akane said.

"Yes," he whispered.

"And it said an army of other nightmares was coming to destroy Kilahito."

"From the west," Painter said. "It sounds ridiculous. But it's true."

Tense silence. Though other patrons continued to eat, it was like this one section of the room had been muffled. As if nothing there lived. As if he were still alone.

"Suppose we'd better go with you then," Tojin said, and stood.

Painter looked up, his heart leaping.

"You *believe* him?" Izzy said, gesturing to Painter. "Really?"

Tojin shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen, Izzy? If he's wrong, we get a little embarrassed and have to come back and eat our noodles cold." He looked at Painter. "If he's right, and we don't go, then what?" He took a deep breath, then offered a beefy hand to Painter.

Painter took it and was hauled to his feet.

"I agree," Masaka said softly, from within her thick sweater-and-scarf shroud. "I think we should go. Just in case."

"If there are a hundred nightmares," Akane said, "then we won't do much to stop them."

"Takanda owes me a favor," Tojin said. "We'll bring him and his painters out to help. And Yuinshi always likes a good laugh—he'll want to watch this. He can bring some more."

"I suppose," Akane said, "I could ask Ikonora to come as well. And she could probably gather a few… We won't have a hundred painters. But maybe twenty or thirty."

"Yes, *please*," Painter said. He clutched Tojin's hand. "Thank you."

“The other night,” he said, “when the stable nightmare attacked…it turned away, for no reason, and fled. When it did, I thought for the briefest moment I saw you there.” Tojin smiled. “I realized my mind was playing tricks on me. Been thinking about it anyway, and it occurred to me that you’re the only one who ever took this life seriously.

“Maybe if I’d been a little more like you, I wouldn’t have fallen down and nearly been taken by that thing. I thought, maybe it’s all right to pretend you’re in the Dreamwatch, you know?” He shrugged. “There are worse lies to tell. Anyway, come on. Let’s see how many companions we can gather for you.”

ONE FINAL BIT of explanation. You might be wondering what the spirit did to Yumi and Painter.

Well, by building that Connection between them, it protected Yumi. For when she was in spiritual form, she was immune to the machine's touch. (Much like the hion lines.) The spirit who Connected them hadn't had a plan beyond this: the hope that Yumi, once protected, would be able to help. The spirit hadn't actually expected Yumi and Painter to begin swapping—but when you play with things like Spiritual Connection, irregularities pop up.

This meddling by the spirit placed the machine in a predicament. Suddenly one of the yoki-hijo couldn't have her mind erased. While machines can't generally plan, they *can* assess a situation in all of its complexities and quickly devise a solution. The solution in this case? To keep the narrative going. To let Yumi "travel" to a new town each day and simply continue her life.

Thus, as she slept, it evaporated the previous town and created a new one using imprints left long ago on the shroud. At first, it thought creating a new town for her each day would be enough.

However, she refused to move on. She stayed in that second town for weeks, acting irregularly. The wrongness compounded, and the machine reassessed. Yumi was dangerous, and there was something distinctly odd about her behavior. So the machine called upon its most dedicated servants, the scholars: its creators. They had been kept apart from the soup of the shroud and held in reserve, their wills dominated but their minds left partially free, for just such a situation.

The scholars had been sent, therefore, as agents. They'd played a role like everyone else, reenacting things they'd done seventeen hundred years before. Showing off their machine prototype to the small towns. However, they'd come with a secondary mandate: to discover what was wrong in the town and to fix the problem, no matter what that required.

That brings us, finally, to the present. Where Yumi had a different problem. The tree she was flying on was made from the shroud.

That made sense to her. The buildings hadn't been real, nor had the people. Why would the plants be real? It had all been a charade orchestrated to control her. Better if every element, then, could be controlled exactly.

As she rose higher in the air, the tree started to warp beneath her fingers. Wisps of smoke began to trail from it. Being created from the shroud, the tree was subject to her enemy's control—which meant the machine could make its form vanish back into the shroud. Something it was starting to do, if more slowly than the machine would have liked.

She soon hit the invisible wall around her little town. Here the shroud had been painted to give the illusion of a landscape extending forever. Once she touched it, that wall warped and bent—letting her pass through. For the first time in almost two thousand years, she physically left that pocket of land and entered the shroud proper.

The darkness was strangely transparent to her. (And she didn't even have to burn tin.) Perhaps this was because she was made of its same substance. Once she was within it—hovering on a tree that was shrinking by the minute—she saw a dark and ruined landscape below. Nothing growing—just dark stone that had been hidden from the sun for millennia. Behind her, the town faded. She could see it retreating, a column with a dome on top. A piece of her broke when she realized even the sunlight she'd basked in and loved—even the sight of the daystar itself—had somehow been fake.

(She was wrong, by the way. The sunlight, actually, was real—the domes over the cities let sunlight through in one direction without allowing light back out the other way. So while what she felt was authentic, those of us surveying the world from above didn't spot these prisons. In addition, the heat from the ground was real, created by the machine using a concentration of Invested essence.)

From this height, Yumi could make out other dome-topped columns in the distance. These too were transparent to her eyes, lights standing out like candles on a dark night. The prisons of the thirteen other yoki-hijo. And in the middle of it all, a brilliant larger light that she figured must be Torio City, the capital. Home of the festival. Seat of the queen.

Yumi was drifting away from it.

That was a much smaller problem than the fact that her tree was unraveling faster now—joining with the smoky blackness. Beneath her, dark shapes gathered. The scholars had not given up. Indeed, she flew like a banner out here, hard to miss. She started to drift downward as her tree continued to cease being a tree. She clung to it, eyes closed, resting her forehead against the wood.

Please. Please, spirits. Let it continue.

The bark beneath her forehead hardened. The tree stabilized in the air. Yumi opened her eyes, surprised—and embarrassed by that surprise. She'd prayed. The spirits had answered. It was just… she didn't usually see them answer so quickly…

She started to fall again, the tree unraveling.

No! she thought. And again it recovered. Because…*Because what I believe to be true is true,* Yumi realized. *This tree is created from the shroud. And by thinking of it as something else, I can force that to be the reality.*

As she thought this way, the tree indeed became even more solid.

And the wind, Yumi thought forcefully. *I am lucky. Because it blows the right direction.*

The tree shifted in the wind, turning the way she needed it to go, toward Torio City. Toward the machine.

AN HOUR LATER, painters gathered at the western edge of the city, laying down stacks of canvases and large jars of ink. Favors had been cashed in. Promises given. Debts incurred. In total, thirty-seven had come.

Painter watched it all with excruciating anxiety, worried that the assault would come while they were still preparing. But now that he had them all organized—a good ten to fifteen percent of the city's total painters—he found himself overwhelmed with gratitude. His friends had not gone halfway in their efforts. It was still a small force, considering what was coming. And not one of them save him had any experience painting stable nightmares.

But it was a far, far cry from where he'd been before, standing here alone.

"All right, Akane," a lanky painter called. "What are we doing here again?"

"Waiting," she said. "Something might be coming. Something dangerous. Have your paints ready."

The others settled in, chatting in groups, some sitting with their backs to the wall of warehouse buildings around the city. Painter turned his eyes to the shroud and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

A full hour with all of them gathered there, grumbles increasing. His anxiety rising. What if he'd picked the wrong location? What if the others got bored and left right before the attack happened?

What if…

While Tojin placated one of the leaders among the other groups. Akane walked up, hands clasped behind her back. She looked tired.

"Nikaro," she said, "is your sister safe? Please tell me she's staying, for once, in your room."

"She's…not going to be painting. I will explain eventually, but you don't need to worry about her." *I'll do enough of that for all of us.*

Telling the truth was one thing. Explaining what had been happening with him and Yumi…well, that would have to wait. Akane glanced out at the shroud, concern written across her face. Then she looked back at him. "Tell me again what we're waiting for?"

"They'll come," Painter promised her before she could continue. "A hundred nightmares. It's going to happen."

"It's all right if it doesn't, you know."

"You all put your reputations on the line for this," Painter said. He'd noticed the glares from some painters as they realized he was involved. The others had left his name out of the recruitment efforts. Wisely.

She shrugged. "Like Tojin said. We might get embarrassed for a little while. Nothing we can't live down."

"Akane," he said, "I know it sounds strange, but I *did* speak to a nightmare. I…I can't explain it all. I promise though, this is really going to happen."

"And…if it doesn't, Nikaro?"

"I wouldn't lie to you," he said, his voice strained. "Not again."

"I'm not saying you would," she whispered. "But Nikaro, what if…maybe you imagined it. What if you…need help? Because sometimes, things you want to be real *feel* real?"

"I—"

"Please," Akane said. "Consider it."

He forced himself to. For her; for the effort they'd given him. He closed his eyes, and actually wondered. The things he'd experienced seemed so incredible, even outlandish. There *was* an easy explanation.

He'd wanted so badly to be someone special. He'd viewed himself, all these months, as a lone warrior wandering the night, looking for people to save. Could he have just…made it all up? Formed everything out of the shroud? Or even worse, simply imagined it?

He rebelled against the thought, but a calmer part of him—the part that had survived the shame of his previous lies—stood fast. Willing to examine this. If it was true, if he'd devised all of this, then Akane was right. He needed help. It wasn't a lie, or even a moral failing, to admit that.

"If it turns out," he said, opening his eyes, "that nothing comes of this…then yes, Akane. I'll get help."

She nodded toward the others. "Why don't I tell them this was a drill of sorts? Us trying to figure out how quickly we could gather a force to protect the city in an emergency."

"No," Painter said, taking her arm. "Don't lie to them. If you decide you need to dismiss them…tell them the truth. That you were humoring me. In remembrance of our former friendship."

She hugged him then.

"I'm truly sorry," he whispered, holding to her. "About everything I've done. Said. And the things I haven't said most of all."

"We know," she said, pulling back. "I can't speak for the others, but I forgive you, Nikaro. I know you didn't want to hurt us."

He smiled.

"Uh, *guys*?" Masaka said, hurrying over. "Have you ever seen it do *that* before?"

Painter turned.

The shroud was undulating. Agitating, *frothing*.

"Grab your things!" Painter shouted. "They're coming!"

People scrambled to their feet, gaping. Stunned.

As the nightmares began to emerge.

YUMI KNEW, AS she approached Torio City, that she needed to let the tree land.

She couldn't defeat the machine while dealing with the nightmares who were still down there hunting her. She needed to confront them first. Instinct propelled her, but also good logic. Because she remembered something Design had told her.

Her tree floated down, unraveling as it lowered. As she landed, she stepped free, allowing it to vanish fully. Four ghastly figures stood before her, blocking the way into Torio City. All around was eternal night, barren stone veiled by a pervasive black smoke.

The four nightmares came for her and slammed their claws into her. Seeking to draw out her strength, to sap it, to freeze her.

But she was stronger than they were.

You could consume them.

As they tried to pull her strength away, she simply…refused.

"I am the one who the spirits chose," she said, feeling their claws pass through her harmlessly. "I am the thing you had to lock up."

They stumbled back from her, shrinking. As nightmares sometimes do when no longer feared.

"I am the one that nightmares fear," she said, imagining them. Knowing them for what they were. Forcing the figures to coalesce into four spindly scholars. "And *you* shall bow to *me*."

Color flooded them and they gasped, falling to the ground.

Yumi walked to the lead scholar, who sat up first, looking at her with frightened eyes. She didn't

attack him though. She sat before him in a pose of meditation.

"Tell me," she said softly, "how to destroy the machine."

"You…" He glanced toward his colleagues, who lay in a lump. "You can't. I'm sorry." He bowed his head and began to shake. "I'm sorry… Oh, what have we done? What have we done…"

"It's all right," Yumi said. "What has happened is in the past. I am the yoki-hijo. My word is law. You may rest, once this is through."

"Thank you," he said, taking her by the hand. "But you can't stop it."

"There is no need to protect the machine. You are free from its control. It cannot hurt you, no matter how much it wants to."

"You don't understand," the scholar said. "It doesn't *want* anything. It's not alive."

"But the way everyone has acted," she said. "Something *is* controlling them."

"That is because of the instructions *we* gave the machine," he explained. "We built it to protect itself and to harvest energy from the spirits. These are not the machine's wishes, any more than a tree *wants* to grow. But once it started drawing on us, on all of us…we defended it because…because we were then part of it somehow."

She frowned, looking beyond him into the city. A shining, beautiful city full of buildings like towers, with fountains, trees, red roofs, and sculptures of dragons. Empty of people.

"It uses our souls as energy," she said.

"Originally it did," the scholar said. "Now it uses the spirits, which are trapped eternally to fuel the machine. Oh…what have we *done*?"

"Our people became but memories," another of the scholars whispered, eyes down. "Their souls as smoke."

"Our shame," another said. "Our sorrow. Powered perpetually by the spirits now, the machine will never run out, never shut down on its own."

"We *must* turn it off," Yumi said.

The lead scholar shook his head. "It is shielded. Protected as per its core instructions. There is no plug or hion line to remove. It self-perpetuates, fed by thousands of eternal spirits. I'm sorry. I wish… wish we could have left you alone. It's incredible that you made it this far."

"But worthless in the end," another scholar said. "It will wipe out the city of Kilahito now. Any trace of what happened with you and that boy will be annihilated."

"No," Yumi whispered, standing. "My world. My rules."

She stepped forward and commanded her nightgown to change. Black smoke swirled and she emerged from it wearing the dress that Akane had bought her.

She strode past the scholars, and at long last—seventeen hundred years after the first time she asked Liyun for the privilege—entered Torio City.

And found rubble.

"NIKARO!" A SHRILL voice shouted.

He tore away from his current painting, leaving a nightmare on the ground, curled up in the shape of a sleeping cat. The painters had formed an irregular circle, shoulder to shoulder—but some faltered. Painter rushed across the center of the circle, to the side of a painter he barely recognized. She was breaking, trembling, turning away from the nightmares in a panic.

Painter stepped in and slammed the tip of his brush down, ignoring her canvas. With a powerful swirl, he created a flower on the ground itself—a lotus, floating, opening its many petals to the air

like a fist unclenching.

The nightmare shrank into the shape, forced to conform to his will. But like every other nightmare they'd faced tonight, it didn't evaporate away as usual.

In all honesty, the painters probably should have been slaughtered. But the machine was distracted by Yumi, and the nightmares were momentarily confused, surprised at the unexpected resistance. They prowled around the ring, looking to feed on the painters, but not rushing in a throng to attack. That didn't make it *easy* on Painter and his team, as the nightmares were terrifying and mostly stable. But these minutes of confusion made resisting them *possible*.

Still, the humans were *not* prepared for such a fight as this. They had to ward away each nightmare that came close—had to face down stable monsters and not break. They painted with trembling hands, and kept stopping and staring, panicking. Painter had to watch for this, because he had a sense the sole thing keeping them alive was this unified front. This collective force of painting, not allowing any one nightmare to attack the circle and break it completely. Even as he finished his lotus, he noticed Izzy freezing in terror.

Painter shoved her aside and attacked her nightmare with a painting. "Hold the circle!" he shouted as he crafted a bird, seeing that in the shape of the nightmare. It looked a little like the great ravens he'd seen in Yumi's world. "Keep painting! See how most of them mill around, distracted by our work. They cannot take us so long as we are painting! You've fought nightmares before. These are the same!"

But they weren't. These were bigger, their forms more terrible. Those eyes like the hollow insides of bones. The scraping of claws on the ground. Worst of all, none of them vanished when painted. They shrank down, but smoldered there like embers—then started growing again once attention was no longer on them.

Paintings alone weren't enough to hold these. His one consolation was that instead of continuing in through the city, the monsters had surrounded the circle. For now, Kilahito was safe. But as Painter finished helping Izzy, a scream rose from across the circle. He spun to find Nanakai—a painter in her forties—falling in a flash of blood as a nightmare seized upon her nervousness and pushed forward, attacking.

Two others grabbed her as she stammered on the ground, staring with horror at the gouges across her side and arm. Painter had to leap over her and hold the line, but he needed to capture three nightmares at once. And so, without thinking, he defaulted to bamboo. Simple bamboo.

In that moment, it was actually what he needed. It froze all three nightmares briefly, long enough for someone else to step in and help.

He couldn't stop the entire army himself. He couldn't stop them at *all*, not permanently. It was only a matter of time.

RUBBLE. THE BEAUTIFUL city she'd seen outside was an illusion, a veneer painted on the surface of the wall protecting the place. Perhaps that was how it had once looked, hundreds of years ago.

Now Yumi walked amid fallen stones and crumbling walls. Roofs had long since decayed away. Turned out she couldn't visit Torio City itself. Only its grave.

One structure remained at the very center of the city. Yumi imagined it as a grand exhibit hall, with banners out front for the festival of the spirits. Where the scholars had unveiled their amazing new project: a machine that could summon spirits and provide a new form of energy. Hion.

It would change the world.

From the top of the steps, Yumi turned to gaze out through the shroud. In the distance glowed the

points of light spaced around Torio City.

"It cannot defeat us like the others," she whispered to herself. "Remember that." She stepped inside the building.

The machine was there, dominating the interior like a fat mushroom overgrowing all its siblings. Fully thirty feet tall, with hundreds of legs, it piled stones on all sides in an eternal process—other legs knocking them over as it went. It would have long since broken down, but Investiture—the smoke—repaired each worn joint, replaced each cracked limb. It was, you might say, an undead machine.

Thousands of spirits surrounded it, just beyond the ring of stones. Shimmering entities of liquid light, blue and red in swirls. Imagine them like frozen orbs of water, yet undulating, moving in a rhythm. Like an audience at a concert. Or a sermon.

Yumi steeled herself and stepped forward…before planting face-first into an invisible barrier right inside the doorway.

She pressed her hands against it, then looked through, trapped outside. This place was shielded, as the scholars had said.

"WE CAN'T HOLD these!" Tojin shouted, pulling Painter by the arm. "It's not working! They recover after we paint them!"

Painter glanced toward the center of the circle, to where six of their colleagues now huddled with various dire wounds, bleeding out blood like ink on the ground. One woman wasn't moving at all. Others groaned in pain.

Nightmares had flooded the street around them—a churning, seemingly endless mass of black punctuated by those sickly white eyes. Pressing in, shrinking the circle. Growing increasingly bold as they recovered from their momentary confusion.

The painters were running out of canvases. The ground was covered in ink, such that stepping was slick.

"What do we do?" Tojin asked, panicked. "Nikaro, what do we *do*?"

"We paint."

"But—"

"We paint!" Painter shouted. "Because if we do not, they get into the city. Without us, the people die."

"The people ignore us!" another cried. "They turn off their lights. They sleep."

"Because they can't do anything else," Painter shouted, starting his next painting. "We are the line between their fears and their flesh. *We are the Dreamwatch now.*"

"We are the Dreamwatch now," Tojin said, raising his brush. "We are the Dreamwatch now!"

Others took up the cry as a particularly large nightmare loomed over the group. At least fifteen feet high, but familiar.

Yes. *Familiar.*

Lupine. Smoky shape like jagged edges of glass. Liyun was here…

Liyun. Painter's eyes widened.

That was the answer.

YUMI KNELT, DEFEATED, at the invisible barrier surrounding the machine's hall.

Rocks bounced off the shield when she tried to break it down. Her shouts did nothing.

All this way. For nothing.

Pain stabbed at her. But not her own. She frowned and stepped back outside to look…toward something?

Painter, she thought. She could feel him, faintly. The Connection had not been entirely severed.

He was frantic, fighting.

Nightmares will come. Endless nightmares. To destroy him, and all he knows. All that he might have told.

It was not a thought but an impression. Knowledge of what the machine would do to protect itself. The scholars weren't *completely* right about it having no will. Any object as Invested as it was would take on at least some trappings of self-awareness.

Painter would die. If he survived this first wave of nightmares, others would come. Thousands upon thousands, until Kilahito was rubble.

Yumi turned back to the awful machine, tears in her eyes. It, in turn, continued its eternal stacking. To it, one pile was the same as another. Things to build, knock over, then build again. The walls inside, the floor, much of the stone beneath had been chopped up to continue feeding its efforts. Beneath lay the sand its earlier stones had become over the centuries.

It didn't care what it made. All it did was keep going, maintaining its hold on the spirits for power.

It *didn't care*.

Yumi stalked away from the hall of the machine and down the steps, dress flowing and rippling in the wind. At the grand courtyard in front—once magnificent, now rubble—she knelt.

And started stacking.

PAINTER DIDN'T TRY to force Liyun's nightmare into the shape of a bird, or cat, or even bamboo. He didn't look at the shifting darkness to find some vague impression. He didn't need that crutch. He knew what she was.

He *knew* her. Stern and unyielding, yet deep down just wanting to help. Those frown lines, those twin blades of hair, that bell-shaped dress…

He didn't look at her as he painted, but he felt the effects of what he was doing as the others nearby muttered. You weren't supposed to paint nightmares as people. A person could still kill you. The goal was to pick something innocent, harmless.

Liyun was anything but harmless. Yet he *knew* this nightmare at its core. That changed everything. As he finished his canvas with a flourish, he looked up to find her kneeling outside the ring of painters. Hands stained by the ink on the ground, gasping for breath.

And as Painter grabbed another canvas from their dwindling stack, Liyun did *not* revert back to a terrible monster like the others had. The nightmares were *people*.

He needed to treat them as such.

STACKING.

You might not call it an art.

You might find it the strangest idea. This is what Yumi's people revere? This is what they consider the highest aesthetic achievement of their culture? *This?*

Yet all art is meaningless without those to admire it. *You* don't get to decide what constitutes art. But *we* together *do*.

They'd taken Yumi's memories from her. Fortunately, as I've said, some things run deeper than memory. In many ways, despite the centuries, she was still a girl of nineteen. Her lived experience and her maturity aligned on that count.

But her skill…well, that had been growing. Day after day. Year after year. Ability distilled, like water drops forming stalactites through the course of primordial eons, she'd built something inside herself.

She wasn't just good at stacking.

She wasn't merely a master.

Yumi was literally the best who had ever lived. With twenty or more lifetimes' worth of practice.

When she let loose, everything changed. For in her was a power far beyond that of hion.

PAINTER DIDN'T KNOW the other Torish people as well as he did Liyun, but he had painted some of them recently, during meditations. He started there, with broad sweeping lines, crafting the shape of the town mayor.

Out among the sea of nightmares, one changed. Transforming, becoming *himself* again. With a shout, Painter got several others to paint the nightmares between him and that one, shrinking them so he could see it better. As the details manifested, he was able to get more accurate.

The nightmare wanted to be a person again. Painter could *feel* it, and as he outlined the general shape, the mayor fed him other details. Until Painter left the balding man huddling on the ground, terrified and cold, but also harmless.

It was a slow process. But the others took heart as they saw what was happening—that somehow Painter had found a way to make progress, instead of just treading water. They surged with strength, Tojin and Akane calling encouragement, holding back the tide—freezing each nightmare in turn as it tried to break through. Giving Painter room.

One at a time. Person after person. He shrank them down to themselves. Until, exhausted—his fingers cramped, his arms aching—he gave a final flourish to finish Hwanji's hair, and dropped her to the ground. He blinked to realize that the street outside the city had fallen still, save for the moans of the wounded painters and the exhausted sighs of the others.

It was over. Somehow, they'd done it. They'd finished their painting—and in so doing were left with a hundred very confused, very cold Torish townspeople.

Painter let his brush tumble from his fingers and clatter to the stone. He looked west, toward the shroud. Through it. Toward someone he felt beyond.

Someone who was concentrating with incredible focus.

YUMI STACKED.

Dozens of stones. Hundreds of them. She moved without thought, yet with *Intent*, building towering formations around herself from the bones of a broken city.

Sculptures of fifty or more stones. Sixty. Heights so incredible she had to climb up on top of nearby chunks of rubble to finish. She created a spiraling design from the towers, stacks of stones like seeds blown from a spinning flower, flowing from the center of the fallen courtyard.

Each piece fit with the others, and each stack built upon the others. Stone flowed as if it were water. Piles of seemingly impossible balances. Shapes to intrigue the mind. To make you gasp.

Time lost meaning to her. This was her meditation. This was her purpose. This was *creation*. Hundreds of stacks, born from a sublime flow. Sculptures working together on the grandest scale, yet still fascinating in the smallest detail.

This was art. Something the machine, however capable in the technical details, could never understand. Because art is, and always has been, about what it does to us. To the one shaping it and the one experiencing it.

For Yumi, on that transcendent day, she was both. Artist and audience. Alone.

Until the spirits joined her.

Ripped from the technical marvel that was the machine, they flowed out through the stones and emerged. One at a time, surrounding Yumi's creation. Eventually she felt a trembling as the machine panicked and picked up speed. A stack toppled, and she used its stones to create something even better.

A dozen spirits joined her. Two dozen. A hundred. Then hundreds. Each stolen from an increasingly reckless machine. One by one, those that had been transfixed by its precise motions instead turned toward her with awe, rejoicing in her organic creativity. Each was freed from their subjugation by something more beautiful. More meaningful.

At some point, picking up momentum, Yumi realized what she was doing. What this would mean. The machine had created the shroud, and was keeping it in place. Maintaining it, and hoarding all those souls in its clutches, ready to be deployed if needed.

No machine meant no more shroud.

No more souls held captive.

No more…Yumi.

This was true, unfortunately. Though the yoki-hijo had forcibly returned to life from the shroud, they'd only been able to do so because the shroud itself was being maintained by the machine.

Regardless, she did not stop. This time it wasn't about omens, or what she'd been "born" to do. This time, *she* decided: Service to her people. Service to the spirits. And last of all, service to someone she loved. No nightmares meant that Kilahito—and all it contained—would be safe.

So as she placed the final stone and the last spirit was pried from the grip of the dying machine, she looked up. Eastward. Toward someone she could feel out there.

Someone frightened. For her.

Behind Yumi, the machine at last fell still. Slumping, disintegrating as the pieces of it that hadn't been real—most of them, by now—evaporated away. Self-perpetuating, it had needed fuel to keep going. Fuel she had stolen away.

Thank you! the spirits said. *Thank you!*

Yumi sat back on her heels, closed her eyes.

It was finished.

THE TORISH PEOPLE started to evaporate.

By now, others had come to investigate the strange disturbance. Police, EMTs, even reporters. They'd given medical attention to the wounded painters. They'd listened, incredulous, to the accounts of those who had fought in the battle. Nurses had given blankets to the strange people who spoke a language that—without the bond that Yumi and Painter shared—was unintelligible to modern ears.

But then those former nightmares began to fade away, disintegrating into smoke. At first, Painter worried that they were becoming monsters again. He leaped to his feet, casting off his blanket and dropping his tea. But the people just continued to fade.

Each one smiled as it happened. He met Liyun's eyes and she grinned, then turned her eyes upward.

The shroud was undulating again. Different this time. Hissing…

Unraveling.

Yumi? he thought. *Yumi! What is going on?*

I've done it… she thought back.

How? he thought, amazed. *You broke the machine?*

Yes, she replied.

I'm coming to you, he thought, running up to the shroud as it—amazingly—began to crumble away. *Where are you?*

In return, he sensed only regret.

Nikaro, she said. *Do you remember…what you said about sad stories…*

"No," he whispered, falling to his knees. "No…"

YUMI FELT HERSELF going as it all unraveled.

I'm sorry, she thought to him. *But sometimes…sometimes it has to be sad.*

Her arms became smoke, her beautiful dress melding with the pieces of her as they streamed off. For a brief moment, she felt the thanks of the other yoki-hijo, finally relieved from their service, allowed to vanish. And the others beyond them, the thousands upon thousands of people who had made up the shroud. Their souls were now free.

Why? Painter asked, so pained it made her shudder. *Why must it be sad?*

Because this is what I have to do, she whispered back, feeling her entire essence unravel. Memories vanishing. Experiences vaporizing. She couldn't remember her own face any longer. She was…just smoke. From that smoke came old thoughts, echoes. Lies drilled into her from long ago.

I was created to serve, she said. *My life is not my own.*

It doesn't have to be that way, Painter sent to her. *Your life* can *belong to you. It should.*

Around her, the spirits continued to exult, their emotions so strange to her in contrast to her own pain.

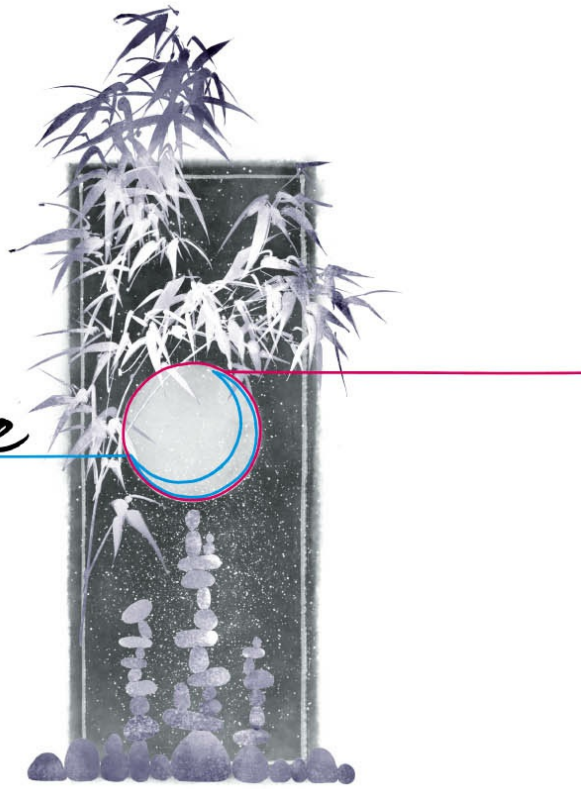
I'm losing myself, Nikaro, she thought. *No one knows me anymore. I don't even know myself. I'm sorry. It was always a dream. Such a wonderful dream. Perhaps the first such ever given by a nightmare…*

Yumi, he sent. *I love you.*

Finally a good emotion.

I love you, Painter, she thought back. *Please. Remember me.*

And at last, the sole remaining yoki-hijo—chosen as a baby, designated to give her life—did exactly that. Evaporating away into nothing.



Epilogue

WHY DO WE tell stories?

They are a universal human experience. Every culture I've ever visited, every people I've met, every human on every planet in every situation I've seen…they all tell stories. Men trapped alone for years tell them to themselves. Ancients leave them painted on the walls. Women whisper them to their babies.

Stories explain us. You want to define what makes a human different from an animal? I can do it in one word or a hundred thousand. Sad stories. Exultant stories. Didactic morality tales. Frivolous yarns that, paradoxically, carry too much meaning.

We *need* stories.

I'm sorry I had to bring this ending to you. But the more you think about it, the more you'll realize that our tale today had to end in such a way. Stories demand certain endings. It's part of their nature.

I wish I could have explained this to Painter, kneeling as he did on the cobbles, staring out as his world turned upside down. Because he didn't understand.

He thought the story wasn't finished.

Painter stood up, then seized his brush in fingers that ached from his extended battle. He took Akane's ink as she cowered down, looking up as the sky opened and the darkness vanished. He strode past terrified police, among wounded painters, past people who cried out at the strange light. He reached a blank wall. The one that had been left for him. The masterpiece he had never finished.

There, as a city panicked—full of people seeing the sun for the first time—he started painting.

Horribly inconsiderate of him. We were all ready to go home. The story should have been done.

He just kept on painting anyway.

A painting is, of course, a story too. Not a still fragment of one as you might think, but an *entire* story. Every painting moves, full of life, if you know how to look at it.

Here he painted a picture of a beautiful woman sitting on the branch of a tree. Soaring high in the sky, flowers bursting behind her like fireworks.

"I know you," he whispered.

The curve of her hair as it curled around the sides of her head to spill down her back. The line of her chin, the defiant confidence in her eyes. The smile. *That* smile.

"I *know* you."

Painter didn't have two thousand years of experience. But in some ways, what he did have was better. Because art requires intent. Art requires passion. And among all the painters in the city, you would never find a person with more of either.

As the city trembled and people panicked all around him, Painter worked calmly. The shroud vanished in large chunks, leaving behind wisps of darkness. He seemed to paint from this smoke itself, using the ink of the soul.

Her dress, the shade of the sky that day, captured in inkwash greyscale. The blazing sun, a section with no paint at all, contrasted by the streaks around it.

Painter finally had a reason for his masterwork.

For him, audience had always been so very important—and today he had a singular audience. One person. The most important one.

Something touched him on the arm. Unseen, yet warm, sending a thrill of heat through him as he painted the flowers. Smoke from the dying shroud clung to him, one of the few patches remaining. No one noticed it. They were too busy dealing with what they assumed was the end of the world.

Another touch. On the other shoulder.

A final flourish, the dots that were her pupils. Then he turned to find smoke behind him, spinning like a vortex. White on the inside, an infinite hole, the eye of a nightmare. Within it a dark shape reaching toward him.

Painter dropped his brush and reached in.

And took her hand.

I… Her voice. *It's not right…*

"Yumi," he said, tears in his eyes, holding on tight. "We decide what is right. Nightmares can be real. Why not dreams? You have power granted by the spirits. Your whole life—your *dozens* of lives—you've used it to serve. Use it for yourself this once."

But…

"Our world, Yumi. Our rules."

I don't…

"Our *world*. Our *rules*."

Our…world.

"You deserve to live."

Our rules.

"You deserve to be happy."

I…deserve to choose. I deserve love.

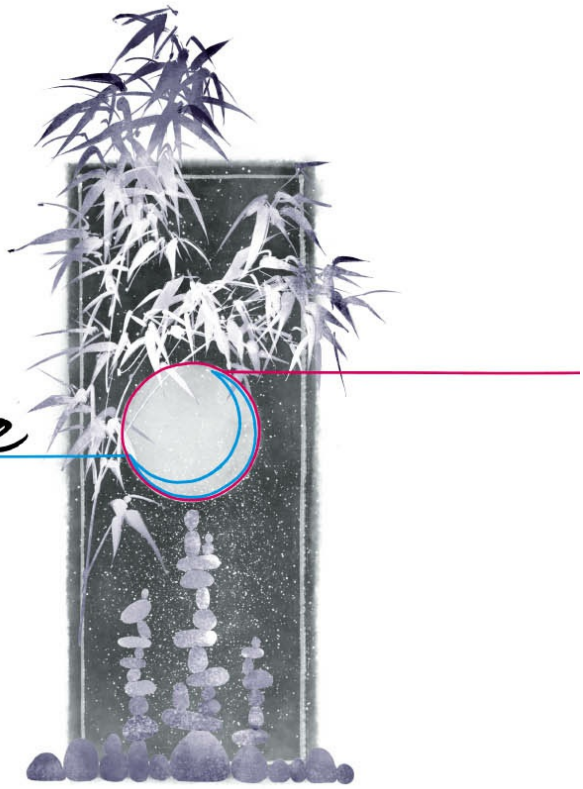
Her other hand emerged from the smoke and seized his. They held to each other as the city trembled, the smoke died, and the world changed. They clung to one another as light from above rained down and shone on her face.

The last wisps of darkness vanished.

And at the end of it all, when someone finally thought to check on him, they found Painter huddled against the wall beneath a masterpiece of incredible caliber, holding a young woman tight in his arms.

As real as anyone else. Because she wanted to be.

Another Epilogue



RIGHT ABOUT THEN, I woke up.

Design was waiting for me, lounging behind the bar, smirking at me in the most unbearable way. Why I ever gave her a face, I'll never know.

"About time you loosened up a little," she said.

"Shut up." I shook off the dozen or so coats that had been hung all over me, then pulled off the hooks and other things she'd attached for the purpose.

I had to blink *paint* out of my *eyes*. Storming Cryptic.

I kept the crown though. It was a special kind of awful.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Remember that time I got my memories stolen?"

"Yes. It was hilarious."

"It was humiliating," I said. "I instituted protection protocols to defend me if something tried to play games with my soul. When we landed here, that machine tried to draw my Investiture. My protocols activated."

"And turned you into a statue?"

"It…wasn't *exactly* what I'd hoped would happen."

She smirked at me. *Insufferable* creature. Then she waved around with two eager hands. "I started a restaurant!"

"Yes, I was aware for much of it," I said.

"Sounds awful!"

"You have no idea."

"Nope! Any desire to stick around until the next pickup in three years?"

"None whatsoever."

Outside the front window of the shop, Painter and Yumi passed, supporting one another. They looked like the way it felt to spend three years being a coatrack. In other words, *terrible*. They paused just outside and kissed, but we'll get to that.

"How are we getting away?" I asked Design.

She disappeared behind the counter, then emerged with a large stack of papers. "I have a *plan*."

"Delightful," I said, finding a handful of individually packaged condiments in my pocket. Who had put *those* in there?

"Yup. You imitate one of their astronauts. We steal their ship. It should be able to get us to Iron Seven Waystation."

"You need all of that?" I asked, pointing at her huge stack of papers. "To explain such a simple plan?"

"What? This isn't my plan. These are my *recipes*."

"Wonderful."

"They mostly aren't. You have no idea how many different combinations of edible ingredients produce something completely *in*edible! It's fun."

"No it's not."

"It's fun," she said, "if someone else is tasting them."

I smiled. "Let's go steal a spaceship."

"Finally!" she said, grabbing her recipes. "I'm ready."

"No worries about abandoning your restaurant?"

"Nope! I willed it to someone. Well, two someones."

"Can they cook?"

"Who cares? Let's go!"

And so, I escaped that dreadful planet. Such was the *actual* point of this story, if you hadn't noticed. Pay attention. And stop encouraging rogue participants to go off script.

I suppose, though, you want some loose ends tied up. Design gets letters from Masaka once in a while with updates, and I was able to send some inquiries to get more details. You should be thankful to her and the others, as this is the type of story I'm only able to tell you because I have the

permission of those involved.

You'll be happy to know the planet, Komashi, survived. (Find it in the UTol system, in dual orbit with the planet UTol—which you might have heard about for other reasons.) The emergence of the sun didn't cause an utter catastrophe on Komashi, though they did learn the hard way about sunburns.

Turns out, a number of the spirits liked being hion lines, and were persuaded to continue in that service—with proper payment. That kept the heat of the ground down to something manageable. There were plants in the ruins of Torio City they could use to start new strains of crops, and the old ones would still grow by hion, if kept in the shade.

It was difficult for a while, but society didn't collapse. Evidently the sky can fall and most people will still get up the next day and go to work. I hear the planet is delightful to visit these days. Warm floors. Flying plants. Neon nights. I wouldn't know, as *I'm* never going to go back.

If you do go, though, stop by the Noodle Princess. I hear it has some of the best food around. And of course there's the attached art gallery. Full of paintings and stacked-up stones. Just don't sneeze.

Painter and Yumi, well, they never told anyone about what had happened to them—though they did eventually manage to convince their friends that she was his secret girlfriend from another city, not his sister. A fact confirmed by his parents when they arrived in a tizzy, worried about what had become of their son during the upheavals.

Nightmares went away forever, at least the living kind. Which meant no more need for painters. Those poor Dreamwatch members had to get jobs at their mommies' and daddies' corporations instead. At Painter's insistence, his friends told everyone that Usasha—the only painter to die in the attack—had been the one to mobilize everyone. She was given the honors.

At the end of it all, Painter and Yumi just wanted a quiet life with each other. Who would have guessed? If you visit, tell them I sent you, as Yumi and Painter do like offworld visitors. Just don't overstay your welcome, try not to out their story to the locals, and be sure to tip your server well. And if you think of it, point out how humanlike she's acting. Masaka is increasingly comfortable with others knowing what she is, but she—like all people—still appreciates a compliment now and then.

Oh, and if you're worried, the planet didn't end up needing yoki-hijo to appease the spirits anymore. Turns out the things really, *really* like historical dramas.

To this day, no one on the planet knows what Yumi actually is. They think of her as the eccentric cook of the best noodle place in town—the woman with the odd accent who can stack a hundred bowls on top of one another, with silverware balanced on each tier.

That should cover it.

Oh. Except the kiss.

That first kiss, outside the noodle shop, bathed in sunlight. Lips together, sharing a deeper warmth, her hands to his face, his arms pulling her tight—as if to never let go. Pressed so close their very souls seemed to mix. And in the case of these two, those souls did at least mash together with a blast of abiding warmth.

That said, it wasn't a very good kiss.

Considering the limited experience of the ones responsible, that won't surprise you. Yet for two people whose only previous brushes with romance involved some particularly aspirational daydreams, it worked well enough.

Plus, here's the thing. A kiss doesn't need to be good to be valuable. It doesn't serve any real purpose. It's valued solely because of the person you share it with.

Things only have the value we give to them. And likewise, actions can be worth whatever we decide them to be worth.

And so, to these two, that kiss was *priceless*.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

THIS IS MY PERSONAL favorite of the Secret Projects. I don't normally pick favorites among my books, so that's an unusual statement for me to make. However, this book in particular felt like a special gift to my wife, who is often encouraging me to feature more romance in my novels.

This one also has some fairly personal inspirations to me as well—indeed, ones you might not expect. For example, the biggest inspiration is a video game.

One of my favorite video games of all time is *Final Fantasy X*, directed by Yoshinori Kitase, which hit me just at the very right time in my life—I love the story of that game. One of the things that has stuck with me all these years since playing it is how the two main characters in it have fantastical jobs. (One plays a cool fantasy sport, while the other's job is to lay spirits of the dead to rest.) It's not something we see enough in fantasy—people with jobs that are suited to the specific style of worldbuilding done in the story.

For years, I've wanted to write a book focusing on the everyday duties of people who had a job in a fantasy world. A job that—to them—was normal, but which would seem strange to us as readers. This idea stewed in the back of my mind for years, as I looked for the right place to explore it.

The second inspiration actually came from my friend, and editorial VP, Peter Ahlstrom. I don't read a lot of manga, but he loves it. For years before I hired him, he was involved in the fan translation (then eventually, the professional translation) community for manga. During our time just after college, he was involved in a fan community working on a manga called *Hikaru no Go*, by Yumi Hotta, with art by Takeshi Obata.

I read that out of solidarity for Peter—and found that I really liked it. That manga focuses on a ghostly master who teaches a young new player to play the game Go. The dynamic is fun because the master, who is haunting the young man, can't play the game—because he has no physical body. But he loves it. The young man doesn't really care for Go at first, but through the coaching of the master, comes to love it too.

From this I took the idea of two people from different walks of life who had to teach each other to do their fantastical jobs. I loved this dynamic—I imagined their frustration at not being able to do the job right, and instead needing to teach someone else to do it well. Two people who need to trade places and learn from one another, not just when it comes to their jobs, but in their lives as well.

This relationship really kicked the story off for me, and I spent a great deal of time planning their romance. I also have a vague memory of a story I read in college about two people who share a bunk on a space station—where room is tight, so people can't have their own sleeping space. But they never see each other, because they work opposite shifts by design, each leaving notes for the other. They fall in love just through the notes they leave. This idea of people who develop a romance unconventionally was extremely appealing to me.

Because two of my influences were Japanese in origin, I decided to lean into this, basing Yumi's culture on historical Korea and Painter's on a more modern Japan. I leaned into some tropes (like the hot spring) from manga and anime—and this also dovetailed nicely into the "trade places" concept I'd been considering. Some excellent anime (*Your Name* by Makoto Shinkai being the standout in my

opinion) uses this idea—that of two people needing to live one another's lives.

That said, one thing that was important to me in this story was interaction. *Your Name*, and that story I can't remember, both depend on people growing fond of one another in absence—and while that's a neat dynamic, I wanted something different. I wanted plenty of interaction. Indeed, I wanted to isolate them from other people, and focus the two inwardly, as they grew together. This romantic goal, again inspired by things my wife has said about stories she loves, is what drove me to write this story in my free time, as a gift for her.

One we're both pleased that you now get to share.

Brandon Sanderson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lives in Utah with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. In addition to completing Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time, he is the author of such bestsellers as the Mistborn saga, *Warbreaker*, the Stormlight Archive series beginning with *The Way of Kings*, *The Rithmatist*, the Skyward series, the Reckoners series beginning with *Steelheart*, and the Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians series. He won the Hugo Award for *The Emperor's Soul*, a novella set in the world of his acclaimed first novel, *Elantris*. For behind-the-scenes information on all his books, visit brandonsanderson.com.

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YUMI AND THE NIGHTMARE PAINTER

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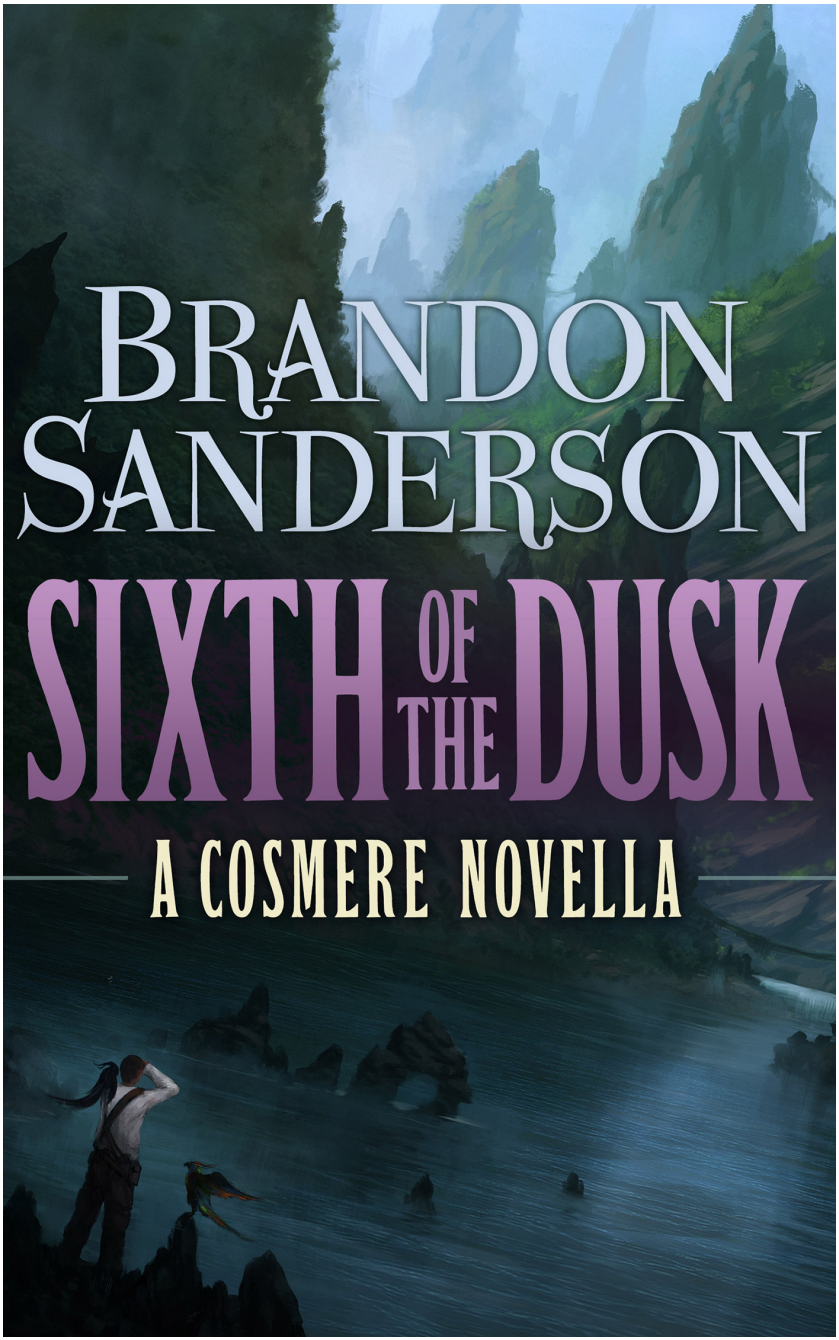
A person is more
than their experiences,
stacked up like stones...
Our best moments are the
foundations we use to
reach for the sky.


BRANDON
SANDERSON
SIXTH OF THE DUSK
A COSMERE NOVELLA

SIXTH OF THE DUSK

BRANDON SANDERSON

For a detailed behind-the-scenes look at the creation of this novella, including brainstorming and workshopping session transcripts, the first draft, line-by-line edits, and an essay by Brandon, please see Shadows Beneath: The Writing Excuses Anthology.

SIXTH OF THE DUSK

Death hunted beneath the waves. Dusk saw it approach, an enormous blackness within the deep blue, a shadowed form as wide as six narrowboats tied together. Dusk's hands tensed on his paddle, his heartbeat racing as he immediately sought out Kokerlii.

Fortunately, the colorful bird sat in his customary place on the prow of the boat, idly biting at one clawed foot raised to his beak. Kokerlii lowered his foot and puffed out his feathers, as if completely unmindful of the danger beneath.

Dusk held his breath. He always did, when unfortunate enough to run across one of these things in the open ocean. He did not know what they looked like beneath those waves. He hoped to never find out.

The shadow drew closer, almost to the boat now. A school of slimfish passing nearby jumped into the air in a silvery wave, spooked by the shadow's approach. The terrified fish showered back to the water with a sound like rain. The shadow did not deviate. The slimfish were too small a meal to interest it.

A boat's occupants, however . . .

It passed directly underneath. Sak chirped quietly from Dusk's shoulder; the second bird seemed to have some sense of the danger. Creatures like the shadow did not hunt by smell or sight, but by sensing the minds of prey. Dusk glanced at Kokerlii again, his only protection against a danger that could swallow his ship whole. He had never clipped Kokerlii's wings, but at times like this he understood why many sailors preferred Aviar that could not fly away.

The boat rocked softly; the jumping slimfish stilled. Waves lapped against the sides of the vessel. Had the shadow stopped? Hesitated? Did it sense them? Kokerlii's protective aura had always been enough before, but . . .

The shadow slowly vanished. It had turned to swim downward, Dusk realized. In moments, he could make out nothing through the waters. He hesitated, then forced himself to get out his new mask. It was a modern device he had acquired only two supply trips back: a glass faceplate with leather at the sides. He placed it on the water's surface and leaned down, looking into the depths. They became as

clear to him as an undisturbed lagoon.

Nothing. Just that endless deep. *Fool man,* he thought, tucking away the mask and getting out his paddle. *Didn't you just think to yourself that you never wanted to see one of those?*

Still, as he started paddling again, he knew that he'd spend the rest of this trip feeling as if the shadow were down there, following him. That was the nature of the waters. You never knew what lurked below.

He continued on his journey, paddling his outrigger canoe and reading the lapping of the waves to judge his position. Those waves were as good as a compass for him—once, they would have been good enough for any of the Eelakin, his people. These days, just the trappers learned the old arts. Admittedly, though, even *he* carried one of the newest compasses, wrapped up in his pack with a set of the new sea charts—maps given as gifts by the Ones Above during their visit earlier in the year. They were said to be more accurate than even the latest surveys, so he'd purchased a set just in case. You could not stop times from changing, his mother said, no more than you could stop the surf from rolling.

It was not long, after the accounting of tides, before he caught sight of the first island. Sori was a small island in the Pantheon, and the most commonly visited. Her name meant child; Dusk vividly remembered training on her shores with his uncle.

It had been long since he'd burned an offering to Sori, despite how well she had treated him during his youth. Perhaps a small offering would not be out of line. Patji would not grow jealous. One could not be jealous of Sori, the least of the islands. Just as every trapper was welcome on Sori, every other island in the Pantheon was said to be affectionate of her.

Be that as it may, Sori did not contain much valuable game. Dusk continued rowing, moving down one leg of the archipelago his people knew as the Pantheon. From a distance, this archipelago was not so different from the homeisles of the Eelakin, now a three-week trip behind him.

From a distance. Up close, they were very, very different. Over the next five hours, Dusk rowed past Sori, then her three cousins. He had never set foot on any of those three. In fact, he had not landed on many of the forty-some islands in the Pantheon. At the end of his apprenticeship, a trapper chose one island and worked there all his life. He had chosen Patji—an event some ten years past

now. Seemed like far less.

Dusk saw no other shadows beneath the waves, but he kept watch. Not that he could do much to protect himself. Kokerlii did all of that work as he roosted happily at the prow of the ship, eyes half-closed. Dusk had fed him seed; Kokerlii did like it so much more than dried fruit.

Nobody knew why beasts like the shadows only lived here, in the waters near the Pantheon. Why not travel across the seas to the Eelakin Islands or the mainland, where food would be plentiful and Aviar like Kokerlii were far more rare? Once, these questions had not been asked. The seas were what they were. Now, however, men poked and prodded into everything. They asked, "Why?" They said, "We should explain it."

Dusk shook his head, dipping his paddle into the water. That sound—wood on water—had been his companion for most of his days. He understood it far better than he did the speech of men.

Even if sometimes their questions got inside of him and refused to go free.

After the cousins, most trappers would have turned north or south, moving along branches of the archipelago until reaching their chosen island. Dusk continued forward, into the heart of the islands, until a shape loomed before him. Patji, largest island of the Pantheon. It towered like a wedge rising from the sea. A place of inhospitable peaks, sharp cliffs, and deep jungle.

Hello, old destroyer, he thought. *Hello, Father.*

Dusk raised his paddle and placed it in the boat. He sat for a time, chewing on fish from last night's catch, feeding scraps to Sak. The black-plumed bird ate them with an air of solemnity. Kokerlii continued to sit on the prow, chirping occasionally. He would be eager to land. Sak seemed never to grow eager about anything.

Approaching Patji was not a simple task, even for one who trapped his shores. The boat continued its dance with the waves as Dusk considered which landing to make. Eventually, he put the fish away, then dipped his paddle back into the waters. Those waters remained deep and blue, despite the proximity to the island. Some members of the Pantheon had sheltered bays and gradual beaches. Patji had no patience for such foolishness. His beaches were rocky and had steep drop-offs.

You were never safe on his shores. In fact, the beaches were the most dangerous part—upon them, not only could the horrors of the

land get to you, but you were still within reach of the deep's monsters. Dusk's uncle had cautioned him about this time and time again. Only a fool slept on Patji's shores.

The tide was with him, and he avoided being caught in any of the swells that would crush him against those stern rock faces. Dusk approached a partially sheltered expanse of stone crags and outcroppings, Patji's version of a beach. Kokerlii fluttered off, chirping and calling as he flew toward the trees.

Dusk immediately glanced at the waters. No shadows. Still, he felt naked as he hopped out of the canoe and pulled it up onto the rocks, warm water washing against his legs. Sak remained in her place on Dusk's shoulder.

Nearby in the surf, Dusk saw a corpse bobbing in the water.

Beginning your visions early, my friend? he thought, glancing at Sak. The Aviar usually waited until they'd fully landed before bestowing her blessing.

The black-feathered bird just watched the waves.

Dusk continued his work. The body he saw in the surf was his own. It told him to avoid that section of water. Perhaps there was a spiny anemone that would have pricked him, or perhaps a deceptive undercurrent lay in wait. Sak's visions did not show such detail; they gave only warning.

Dusk got the boat out of the water, then detached the floats, tying them more securely onto the main part of the canoe. Following that, he worked the vessel carefully up the shore, mindful not to scrape the hull on sharp rocks. He would need to hide the canoe in the jungle. If another trapper discovered it, Dusk would be stranded on the island for several extra weeks preparing his spare. That would—

He stopped as his heel struck something soft as he backed up the shore. He glanced down, expecting a pile of seaweed. Instead he found a damp piece of cloth. A shirt? Dusk held it up, then noticed other, more subtle signs across the shore. Broken lengths of sanded wood. Bits of paper floating in an eddy.

Those fools, he thought.

He returned to moving his canoe. Rushing was never a good idea on a Pantheon island. He did step more quickly, however.

As he reached the tree line, he caught sight of his corpse hanging from a tree nearby. Those were cutaway vines lurking in the fernlike treetop. Sak squawked softly on his shoulder as Dusk hefted

a large stone from the beach, then tossed it at the tree. It thumped against the wood, and sure enough, the vines dropped like a net, full of stinging barbs.

They would take a few hours to retract. Dusk pulled his canoe over and hid it in the underbrush near the tree. Hopefully, other trappers would be smart enough to stay away from the cutaway vines—and therefore wouldn't stumble over his boat.

Before placing the final camouflaging fronds, Dusk pulled out his pack. Though the centuries had changed a trapper's duties very little, the modern world did offer its benefits. Instead of a simple wrap that left his legs and chest exposed, he put on thick trousers with pockets on the legs and a buttoning shirt to protect his skin against sharp branches and leaves. Instead of sandals, Dusk tied on sturdy boots. And instead of a tooth-lined club, he bore a machete of the finest steel. His pack contained luxuries like a steel-hooked rope, a lantern, and a firestarter that created sparks simply by pressing the two handles together.

He looked very little like the trappers in the paintings back home. He didn't mind. He'd rather stay alive.

Dusk left the canoe, shouldering his pack, machete sheathed at his side. Sak moved to his other shoulder. Before leaving the beach, Dusk paused, looking at the image of his translucent corpse, still hanging from unseen vines by the tree.

Could he really have ever been foolish enough to be caught by cutaway vines? Near as he could tell, Sak only showed him plausible deaths. He liked to think that most were fairly unlikely—a vision of what could have happened if he'd been careless, or if his uncle's training hadn't been so extensive.

Once, Dusk had stayed away from any place where he saw his corpse. It wasn't bravery that drove him to do the opposite now. He just . . . needed to confront the possibilities. He needed to be able to walk away from this beach knowing that he could still deal with cutaway vines. If he avoided danger, he would soon lose his skills. He could not rely on Sak too much.

For Patji would try on every possible occasion to kill him.

Dusk turned and trudged across the rocks along the coast. Doing so went against his instincts—he normally wanted to get inland as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he could not leave without investigating the origin of the debris he had seen earlier. He had a strong suspicion of where he would find their source.

He gave a whistle, and Kokerlii trilled above, flapping out of a tree nearby and winging over the beach. The protection he offered would not be as strong as it would be if he were close, but the beasts that hunted minds on the island were not as large or as strong of psyche as the shadows of the ocean. Dusk and Sak would be invisible to them.

About a half hour up the coast, Dusk found the remnants of a large camp. Broken boxes, fraying ropes lying half submerged in tidal pools, ripped canvas, shattered pieces of wood that might once have been walls. Kokerlii landed on a broken pole.

There were no signs of his corpse nearby. That could mean that the area wasn't immediately dangerous. It could also mean that whatever might kill him here would swallow the corpse whole.

Dusk trod lightly on wet stones at the edge of the broken campsite. No. Larger than a campsite. Dusk ran his fingers over a broken chunk of wood, stenciled with the words *Northern Interests Trading Company*. A powerful mercantile force from his homeland.

He had told them. He had *told* them. Do not come to Patji. Fools. And they had camped here on the beach itself! Was nobody in that company capable of listening? He stopped beside a group of gouges in the rocks, as wide as his upper arm, running some ten paces long. They led toward the ocean.

Shadow, he thought. *One of the deep beasts.* His uncle had spoken of seeing one once. An enormous . . . *something* that had exploded up from the depths. It had killed a dozen krell that had been chewing on oceanside weeds before retreating into the waters with its feast.

Dusk shivered, imagining this camp on the rocks, bustling with men unpacking boxes, preparing to build the fort they had described to him. But where was their ship? The great steam-powered vessel with an iron hull they claimed could rebuff the attacks of even the deepest of shadows? Did it now defend the ocean bottom, a home for slimfish and octopus?

There were no survivors—nor even any corpses—that Dusk could see. The shadow must have consumed them. He pulled back to the slightly safer locale of the jungle's edge, then scanned the foliage, looking for signs that people had passed this way. The attack was recent, within the last day or so.

He absently gave Sak a seed from his pocket as he located a series of broken fronds leading into the jungle. So there were survivors.

Maybe as many as a half dozen. They had each chosen to go in different directions, in a hurry. Running from the attack.

Running through the jungle was a good way to get dead. These company types thought themselves rugged and prepared. They were wrong. He'd spoken to a number of them, trying to persuade as many of their "trappers" as possible to abandon the voyage.

It had done no good. He wanted to blame the visits of the Ones Above for causing this foolish striving for progress, but the truth was the companies had been talking of outposts on the Pantheon for years. Dusk sighed. Well, these survivors were likely dead now. He should leave them to their fates.

Except . . . The thought of it, outsiders on Patji, it made him shiver with something that mixed disgust and anxiety. They were *here*. It was wrong. These islands were sacred, the trappers their priests.

The plants rustled nearby. Dusk whipped his machete about, leveling it, reaching into his pocket for his sling. It was not a refugee who left the bushes, or even a predator. A group of small, mouselike creatures crawled out, sniffing the air. Sak squawked. She had never liked meekers.

Food? the three meekers sent to Dusk. *Food?*

It was the most rudimentary of thoughts, projected directly into his mind. Though he did not want the distraction, he did not pass up the opportunity to fish out some dried meat for the meekers. As they huddled around it, sending him gratitude, he saw their sharp teeth and the single pointed fang at the tips of their mouths. His uncle had told him that once, meekers had been dangerous to men. One bite was enough to kill. Over the centuries, the little creatures had grown accustomed to trappers. They had minds beyond those of dull animals. Almost he found them as intelligent as the Aviar.

You remember? he sent them through thoughts. *You remember your task?*

Others, they sent back gleefully. *Bite others!*

Trappers ignored these little beasts; Dusk figured that maybe with some training, the meekers could provide an unexpected surprise for one of his rivals. He fished in his pocket, fingers brushing an old stiff piece of feather. Then, not wanting to pass up the opportunity, he got a few long, bright green and red feathers from his pack. They were mating plumes, which he'd taken from Kokerlii during the Aviar's most recent molting.

He moved into the jungle, meekers following with excitement. Once he neared their den, he stuck the mating plumes into some branches, as if they had fallen there naturally. A passing trapper might see the plumes and assume that Aviar had a nest nearby, fresh with eggs for the plunder. That would draw them.

Bite others, Dusk instructed again.

Bite others! they replied.

He hesitated, thoughtful. Had they perhaps seen something from the company wreck? Point him in the right direction. *Have you seen any others?* Dusk sent them. *Recently? In the jungle?*

Bite others! came the reply.

They were intelligent . . . but not *that* intelligent. Dusk bade the animals farewell and turned toward the forest. After a moment's deliberation, he found himself striking inland, crossing—then following—one of the refugee trails. He chose the one that looked as if it would pass uncomfortably close to one of his own safecamps, deep within the jungle.

It was hotter here beneath the jungle's canopy, despite the shade. Comfortably sweltering. Kokerlii joined him, winging up ahead to a branch where a few lesser Aviar sat chirping. Kokerlii towered over them, but sang at them with enthusiasm. An Aviar raised around humans never quite fit back in among their own kind. The same could be said of a man raised around Aviar.

Dusk followed the trail left by the refugee, expecting to stumble over the man's corpse at any moment. He did not, though his own dead body did occasionally appear along the path. He saw it lying half-eaten in the mud or tucked away in a fallen log with only the foot showing. He could never grow too complacent, with Sak on his shoulder. It did not matter if Sak's visions were truth or fiction; he needed the constant reminder of how Patji treated the unwary.

He fell into the familiar, but not comfortable, lope of a Pantheon trapper. Alert, wary, careful not to brush leaves that could carry biting insects. Cutting with the machete only when necessary, lest he leave a trail another could follow. Listening, aware of his Aviar at all times, never outstripping Kokerlii or letting him drift too far ahead.

The refugee did not fall to the common dangers of the island—he cut across game trails, rather than following them. The surest way to encounter predators was to fall in with their food. The refugee did not know how to mask his trail, but neither did he blunder into

the nest of firesnap lizards, or brush the deathweed bark, or step into the patch of hungry mud.

Was this another trapper, perhaps? A youthful one, not fully trained? That seemed something the company would try. Experienced trappers were beyond recruitment; none would be foolish enough to guide a group of clerks and merchants around the islands. But a youth, who had not yet chosen his island? A youth who, perhaps, resented being required to practice only on Sori until his mentor determined his apprenticeship complete? Dusk had felt that way ten years ago.

So the company had hired itself a trapper at last. That would explain why they had grown so bold as to finally organize their expedition. *But Patji himself?* he thought, kneeling beside the bank of a small stream. It had no name, but it was familiar to him. *Why would they come here?*

The answer was simple. They were merchants. The biggest, to them, would be the best. Why waste time on lesser islands? Why not come for the Father himself?

Above, Kokerlii landed on a branch and began pecking at a fruit. The refugee had stopped by this river. Dusk had gained time on the youth. Judging by the depth the boy's footprints had sunk in the mud, Dusk could imagine his weight and height. Sixteen? Maybe younger? Trappers apprenticed at ten, but Dusk could not imagine even the company trying to recruit one so ill trained.

Two hours gone, Dusk thought, turning a broken stem and smelling the sap. The boy's path continued on toward Dusk's safecamp. How? Dusk had never spoken of it to anyone. Perhaps this youth was apprenticing under one of the other trappers who visited Patji. One of them could have found his safecamp and mentioned it.

Dusk frowned, considering. In ten years on Patji, he had seen another trapper in person only a handful of times. On each occasion, they had both turned and gone a different direction without saying a word. It was the way of such things. They would try to kill one another, but they didn't do it in person. Better to let Patji claim rivals than to directly stain one's hands. At least, so his uncle had taught him.

Sometimes, Dusk found himself frustrated by that. Patji would get them all eventually. Why help the Father out? Still, it was the way of things, so he went through the motions. Regardless, this refugee

was making directly for Dusk's safecamp. The youth might not know the proper way of things. Perhaps he had come seeking help, afraid to go to one of his master's safecamps for fear of punishment. Or . . .

No, best to avoid pondering it. Dusk already had a mind full of spurious conjectures. He would find what he would find. He had to focus on the jungle and its dangers. He started away from the stream, and as he did so, he saw his corpse appear suddenly before him.

He hopped forward, then spun backward, hearing a faint hiss. The distinctive sound was made by air escaping from a small break in the ground, followed by a flood of tiny yellow insects, each as small as a pinhead. A new deathant pod? If he'd stood there a little longer, disturbing their hidden nest, they would have flooded up around his boot. One bite, and he'd be dead.

He stared at that pool of scrambling insects longer than he should have. They pulled back into their nest, finding no prey. Sometimes a small bulge announced their location, but today he had seen nothing. Only Sak's vision had saved him.

Such was life on Patji. Even the most careful trapper could make a mistake—and even if they didn't, death could still find them. Patji was a domineering, vengeful parent who sought the blood of all who landed on his shores.

Sak chirped on his shoulder. Dusk rubbed her neck in thanks, though her chirp sounded apologetic. The warning had come almost too late. Without her, Patji would have claimed him this day. Dusk shoved down those itching questions he should not be thinking, and continued on his way.

He finally approached his safecamp as evening settled upon the island. Two of his tripwires had been cut, disarming them. That was not surprising; those were meant to be obvious. Dusk crept past another deathant nest in the ground—this larger one had a permanent crack as an opening they could flood out of, but the rift had been stoppered with a smoldering twig. Beyond it, the nightwind fungi that Dusk had spent years cultivating here had been smothered in water to keep the spores from escaping. The next two tripwires—the ones not intended to be obvious—had *also* been cut.

Nice work, kid, Dusk thought. He hadn't just avoided the traps, but disarmed them, in case he needed to flee quickly back this

direction. However, someone really needed to teach the boy how to move without being trackable. Of course, those tracks could be a trap unto themselves—an attempt to make Dusk himself careless. And so, he was extra careful as he edged forward. Yes, here the youth had left more footprints, broken stems, and other signs. . . .

Something moved up above in the canopy. Dusk hesitated, squinting. A *woman* hung from the tree branches above, trapped in a net made of jellywire vines—they left someone numb, unable to move. So, one of his traps had finally worked.

"Um, hello?" she said.

A woman, Dusk thought, suddenly feeling stupid. *The smaller footprint, lighter step . . .*

"I want to make it perfectly clear," the woman said. "I have no intention of stealing your birds or infringing upon your territory."

Dusk stepped closer in the dimming light. He recognized this woman. She was one of the clerks who had been at his meetings with the company. "You cut my tripwires," Dusk said. Words felt odd in his mouth, and they came out ragged, as if he'd swallowed handfuls of dust. The result of weeks without speaking.

"Er, yes, I did. I assumed you could replace them." She hesitated. "Sorry?"

Dusk settled back. The woman rotated slowly in her net, and he noticed an Aviar clinging to the outside—like his own birds, it was about as tall as three fists atop one another, though this one had subdued white and green plumage. A streamer, which was a breed that did not live on Patji. He did not know much about them, other than that like Kokerlii, they protected the mind from predators.

The setting sun cast shadows, the sky darkening. Soon, he would need to hunker down for the night, for darkness brought out the island's most dangerous of predators.

"I promise," the woman said from within her bindings. What was her name? He believed it had been told to him, but he did not recall. Something untraditional. "I really don't want to steal from you. You remember me, don't you? We met back in the company halls?"

He gave no reply.

"Please," she said. "I'd really rather not be hung by my ankles from a tree, slathered with blood to attract predators. If it's all the same to you."

"You are not a trapper."

"Well, no," she said. "You may have noticed my gender."

"There have been female trappers."

"One. One female trapper, Yaalani the Brave. I've heard her story a hundred times. You may find it curious to know that almost every society has its myth of the female role reversal. She goes to war dressed as a man, or leads her father's armies into battle, or traps on an island. I'm convinced that such stories exist so that parents can tell their daughters, 'You are not Yaalani.'"

This woman spoke. A lot. People did that back on the Eelakin Islands. Her skin was dark, like his, and she had the sound of his people. The slight accent to her voice . . . he had heard it more and more when visiting the homeisles. It was the accent of one who was educated.

"Can I get down?" she asked, voice bearing a faint tremor. "I cannot feel my hands. It is . . . unsettling."

"What is your name?" Dusk asked. "I have forgotten it." This was too much speaking. It hurt his ears. This place was supposed to be soft.

"Vathi."

That's right. It was an improper name. Not a reference to her birth order and day of birth, but a name like the mainlanders used. That was not uncommon among his people now.

He walked over and took the rope from the nearby tree, then lowered the net. The woman's Aviar flapped down, screeching in annoyance, favoring one wing, obviously wounded. Vathi hit the ground, a bundle of dark curls and green linen skirts. She stumbled to her feet, but fell back down again. Her skin would be numb for some fifteen minutes from the touch of the vines.

She sat there and wagged her hands, as if to shake out the numbness. "So . . . uh, no ankles and blood?" she asked, hopeful.

"That is a story parents tell to children," Dusk said. "It is not something we actually do."

"Oh."

"If you had been another trapper, I would have killed you directly, rather than leaving you to avenge yourself upon me." He walked over to her Aviar, which opened its beak in a hissing posture, raising both wings as if to be bigger than it was. Sak chirped from his shoulder, but the bird didn't seem to care.

Yes, one wing was bloody. Vathi knew enough to care for the bird, however, which was pleasing. Some homeislers were

completely ignorant to their Aviar's needs, treating them like accessories rather than intelligent creatures.

Vathi had pulled out the feathers near the wound, including a blood feather. She'd wrapped the wound with gauze. That wing didn't look good, however. Might be a fracture involved. He'd want to wrap both wings, prevent the creature from flying.

"Oh, Mirris," Vathi said, finally finding her feet. "I tried to help her. We fell, you see, when the monster—"

"Pick her up," Dusk said, checking the sky. "Follow. Step where I step."

Vathi nodded, not complaining, though her numbness would not have passed yet. She collected a small pack from the vines and straightened her skirts. She wore a tight vest above them, and the pack had some kind of metal tube sticking out of it. A map case? She fetched her Aviar, who huddled happily on her shoulder.

As Dusk led the way, she followed, and she did not attempt to attack him when his back was turned. Good. Darkness was coming upon them, but his safecamp was just ahead, and he knew by heart the steps to approach along this path. As they walked, Kokerlii fluttered down and landed on the woman's other shoulder, then began chirping in an amiable way.

Dusk stopped, turning. The woman's own Aviar moved down her dress away from Kokerlii to cling near her bodice. The bird hissed softly, but Kokerlii—oblivious, as usual—continued to chirp happily. It was fortunate his breed was so mind-invisible, even deathants would consider him no more edible than a piece of bark.

"Is this . . ." Vathi said, looking to Dusk. "Yours? But of course. The one on your shoulder is not Aviar."

Sak settled back, puffing up her feathers. No, her species was not Aviar. Dusk continued to lead the way.

"I have never seen a trapper carry a bird who was not from the islands," Vathi said from behind.

It was not a question. Dusk, therefore, felt no need to reply.

This safecamp—he had three total on the island—lay atop a short hill following a twisting trail. Here, a stout gurratree held aloft a single-room structure. Trees were one of the safer places to sleep on Patji. The treetops were the domain of the Aviar, and most of the large predators walked.

Dusk lit his lantern, then held it aloft, letting the orange light bathe his home. "Up," he said to the woman.

She glanced over her shoulder into the darkening jungle. By the lanternlight, he saw that the whites of her eyes were red from lack of sleep, despite the unconcerned smile she gave him before climbing up the stakes he'd planted in the tree. Her numbness should have worn off by now.

"How did you know?" he asked.

Vathi hesitated, near to the trapdoor leading into his home. "Know what?"

"Where my safecamp was. Who told you?"

"I followed the sound of water," she said, nodding toward the small spring that bubbled out of the mountainside here. "When I found traps, I knew I was coming the right way."

Dusk frowned. One could not hear this water, as the stream vanished only a few hundred yards away, resurfacing in an unexpected location. Following it here . . . that would be virtually impossible.

So was she lying, or was she just lucky?

"You wanted to find me," he said.

"I wanted to find *someone*," she said, pushing open the trapdoor, voice growing muffled as she climbed up into the building. "I figured that a trapper would be my only chance for survival." Above, she stepped up to one of the netted windows, Kokerlii still on her shoulder. "This is nice. Very roomy for a shack on a mountainside in the middle of a deadly jungle on an isolated island surrounded by monsters."

Dusk climbed up, holding the lantern in his teeth. The room at the top was perhaps four paces square, tall enough to stand in, but only barely. "Shake out those blankets," he said, nodding toward the stack and setting down the lantern. "Then lift every cup and bowl on the shelf and check inside of them."

Her eyes widened. "What am I looking for?"

"Deathants, scorpions, spiders, bloodscratches . . ." He shrugged, putting Sak on her perch by the window. "The room is built to be tight, but this is Patji. The Father likes surprises."

As she hesitantly set aside her pack and got to work, Dusk continued up another ladder to check the roof. There, a group of bird-size boxes, with nests inside and holes to allow the birds to come and go freely, lay arranged in a double row. The animals would not stray far, except on special occasions, now that they had been raised with him handling them.

Kokerlii landed on top of one of the homes, trilling—but softly, now that night had fallen. More coos and chirps came from the other boxes. Dusk climbed out to check each bird for hurt wings or feet. These Aviar pairs were his life's work; the chicks each one hatched became his primary stock in trade. Yes, he would trap on the island, trying to find nests and wild chicks—but that was never as efficient as raising nests.

"Your name was Sixth, wasn't it?" Vathi said from below, voice accompanied by the sound of a blanket being shaken.

"It is."

"Large family," Vathi noted.

An ordinary family. Or, so it had once been. His father had been a twelfth and his mother an eleventh.

"Sixth of what?" Vathi prompted below.

"Of the Dusk."

"So you were born in the evening," Vathi said. "I've always found the traditional names so . . . uh . . . *descriptive*."

What a meaningless comment, Dusk thought. *Why do homeislers feel the need to speak when there is nothing to say?*

He moved on to the next nest, checking the two drowsy birds inside, then inspecting their droppings. They responded to his presence with happiness. An Aviar raised around humans—particularly one that had lent its talent to a person at an early age—would always see people as part of their flock. These birds were not his companions, like Sak and Kokerlii, but they were still special to him.

"No insects in the blankets," Vathi said, sticking her head up out of the trapdoor behind him, her own Aviar on her shoulder.

"The cups?"

"I'll get to those in a moment. So these are your breeding pairs, are they?"

Obviously they were, so he didn't need to reply.

She watched him check them. He felt her eyes on him. Finally, he spoke. "Why did your company ignore the advice we gave you? Coming here was a disaster."

"Yes."

He turned to her.

"Yes," she continued, "this whole expedition will likely be a disaster—a disaster that takes us a step closer to our goal."

He checked Sisisru next, working by the light of the now-rising

moon. “Foolish.”

Vathi folded her arms before her on the roof of the building, torso still disappearing into the lit square of the trapdoor below. “Do you think that our ancestors learned to wayfind on the oceans without experiencing a few disasters along the way? Or what of the first trappers? You have knowledge passed down for generations, knowledge earned through trial and error. If the first trappers had considered it too ‘foolish’ to explore, where would you be?”

“They were single men, well-trained, not a ship full of clerks and dockworkers.”

“The world is changing, Sixth of the Dusk,” she said softly. “The people of the mainland grow hungry for Aviar companions; things once restricted to the very wealthy are within the reach of ordinary people. We’ve learned so much, yet the Aviar are still an enigma. Why don’t chicks raised on the homeisles bestow talents? Why—”

“Foolish arguments,” Dusk said, putting Sisisru back into her nest. “I do not wish to hear them again.”

“And the Ones Above?” she asked. “What of their technology, the wonders they produce?”

He hesitated, then he took out a pair of thick gloves and gestured toward her Aviar. Vathi looked at the white and green Aviar, then made a comforting clicking sound and took her in two hands. The bird suffered it with a few annoyed half bites at Vathi’s fingers.

Dusk carefully took the bird in his gloved hands—for him, those bites would not be as timid—and undid Vathi’s bandage. Then he cleaned the wound—much to the bird’s protests—and carefully placed a new bandage. From there, he wrapped the bird’s wings around its body with another bandage, not too tight, lest the creature be unable to breathe.

She didn’t like it, obviously. But flying would hurt that wing more, with the fracture. She’d eventually be able to bite off the bandage, but for now, she’d get a chance to heal. Once done, he placed her with his other Aviar, who made quiet, friendly chirps, calming the flustered bird.

Vathi seemed content to let her bird remain there for the time, though she watched the entire process with interest.

“You may sleep in my safecamp tonight,” Dusk said, turning back to her.

“And then what?” she asked. “You turn me out into the jungle to die?”

"You did well on your way here," he said, grudgingly. She was not a trapper. A scholar should not have been able to do what she did. "You will probably survive."

"I got lucky. I'd never make it across the entire island."

Dusk paused. "Across the island?"

"To the main company camp."

"There are *more* of you?"

"I . . . Of course. You didn't think . . ."

"What happened?" *Now who is the fool?* he thought to himself. *You should have asked this first.* Talking. He had never been good with it.

She shied away from him, eyes widening. Did he look dangerous? Perhaps he had barked that last question forcefully. No matter. She spoke, so he got what he needed.

"We set up camp on the far beach," she said. "We have two ironhulls armed with cannons watching the waters. Those can take on even a deepwalker, if they have to. Two hundred soldiers, half that number in scientists and merchants. We're determined to find out, once and for all, why the Aviar must be born on one of the Pantheon Islands to be able to bestow talents.

"One team came down this direction to scout sites to place another fortress. The company is determined to hold Patji against other interests. I thought the smaller expedition a bad idea, but had my own reasons for wanting to circle the island. So I went along. And then, the deepwalker . . ." She looked sick.

Dusk had almost stopped listening. Two *hundred* soldiers? Crawling across Patji like ants on a fallen piece of fruit. Unbearable! He thought of the quiet jungle broken by the sounds of their racketous voices. The sound of humans yelling at each other, clanging on metal, stomping about. Like a city.

A flurry of dark feathers announced Sak coming up from below and landing on the lip of the trapdoor beside Vathi. The black-plumed bird limped across the roof toward Dusk, stretching her wings, showing off the scars on her left. Flying even a dozen feet was a chore for her.

Dusk reached down to scratch her neck. It was happening. An invasion. He had to find a way to stop it. Somehow . . .

"I'm sorry, Dusk," Vathi said. "The trappers are fascinating to me; I've read of your ways, and I respect them. But this was *going* to happen someday; it's inevitable. The islands *will* be tamed. The

Aviar are too valuable to leave in the hands of a couple hundred eccentric woodsmen."

"The chiefs . . ."

"All twenty chiefs in council agreed to this plan," Vathi said. "I was there. If the Eelakin do not secure these islands and the Aviar, someone else will."

Dusk stared out into the night. "Go and make certain there are no insects in the cups below."

"But—"

"*Go*," he said, "and make *certain* there are no insects in the cups below!"

The woman sighed softly, but retreated into the room, leaving him with his Aviar. He continued to scratch Sak on the neck, seeking comfort in the familiar motion and in her presence. Dared he hope that the shadows would prove too deadly for the company and its iron-hulled ships? Vathi seemed confident.

She did not tell me why she joined the scouting group. She had seen a shadow, witnessed it destroying her team, but had still managed the presence of mind to find his camp. She was a strong woman. He would need to remember that.

She was also a company type, as removed from his experience as a person could get. Soldiers, craftsmen, even chiefs he could understand. But these soft-spoken scribes who had quietly conquered the world with a sword of commerce, they baffled him.

"Father," he whispered. "What do I do?"

Patji gave no reply beyond the normal sounds of night. Creatures moving, hunting, rustling. At night, the Aviar slept, and that gave opportunity to the most dangerous of the island's predators. In the distance a nightmaw called, its horrid screech echoing through the trees.

Sak spread her wings, leaning down, head darting back and forth. The sound always made her tremble. It did the same to Dusk.

He sighed and rose, placing Sak on his shoulder. He turned, and almost stumbled as he saw his corpse at his feet. He came alert immediately. What was it? Vines in the tree branches? A spider, dropping quietly from above? There wasn't supposed to be anything in his safecamp that could kill him.

Sak screeched as if in pain.

Nearby, his other Aviar cried out as well, a cacophony of squawks, screeches, chirps. No, it wasn't just them! All around . . .

echoing in the distance, from both near and far, wild Aviar squawked. They rustled in their branches, a sound like a powerful wind blowing through the trees.

Dusk spun about, holding his hands to his ears, eyes wide as corpses appeared around him. They piled high, one atop another, some bloated, some bloody, some skeletal. Haunting him. Dozens upon *dozens*.

He dropped to his knees, yelling. That put him eye-to-eye with one of his corpses. Only this one . . . this one was not quite dead. Blood dripped from its lips as it tried to speak, mouthing words that Dusk did not understand.

It vanished.

They all did, every last one. He spun about, wild, but saw no bodies. The sounds of the Aviar quieted, and his flock settled back into their nests. Dusk breathed in and out deeply, heart racing. He felt tense, as if at any moment a shadow would explode from the blackness around his camp and consume him. He anticipated it, felt it coming. He wanted to run, run *somewhere*.

What had that been? In all of his years with Sak, he had never seen anything like it. What could have upset all of the Aviar at once? Was it the nightmaw he had heard?

Don't be foolish, he thought. *This was different, different from anything you've seen. Different from anything that has been seen on Patji.* But what? What had changed . . .

Sak had not settled down like the others. She stared northward, toward where Vathi had said the main camp of invaders was setting up.

Dusk stood, then clambered down into the room below, Sak on his shoulder. "What are your people doing?"

Vathi spun at his harsh tone. She had been looking out of the window, northward. "I don't—"

He took her by the front of her vest, pulling her toward him in a two-fisted grip, meeting her eyes from only a few inches away. "*What are your people doing?*"

Her eyes widened, and he could feel her tremble in his grip, though she set her jaw and held his gaze. Scribes were not supposed to have grit like this. He had seen them scribbling away in their windowless rooms. Dusk tightened his grip on her vest, pulling the fabric so it dug into her skin, and found himself growling softly.

"Release me," she said, "and we will speak."

“Bah,” he said, letting go. She dropped a few inches, hitting the floor with a thump. He hadn’t realized he’d lifted her off the ground.

She backed away, putting as much space between them as the room would allow. He stalked to the window, looking through the mesh screen at the night. His corpse dropped from the roof above, hitting the ground below. He jumped back, worried that it was happening again.

It didn’t, not the same way as before. However, when he turned back into the room, his corpse lay in the corner, bloody lips parted, eyes staring sightlessly. The danger, whatever it was, had not passed.

Vathi had sat down on the floor, holding her head, trembling. Had he frightened her that soundly? She did look tired, exhausted. She wrapped her arms around herself, and when she looked at him, there was a cast to her eyes that hadn’t been there before—as if she were regarding a wild animal let off its chain.

That seemed fitting.

“What do you know of the Ones Above?” she asked him.

“They live in the stars,” Dusk said.

“We at the company have been meeting with them. We don’t understand their ways. They look like us; at times they talk like us. But they have . . . rules, laws that they won’t explain. They refuse to sell us their marvels, but in like manner, they seem forbidden from taking things from us, even in trade. They promise it, someday when we are more advanced. It’s like they think we are children.”

“Why should we care?” Dusk said. “If they leave us alone, we will be better for it.”

“You haven’t seen the things they can do,” she said softly, getting a distant look in her eyes. “We have barely worked out how to create ships that can sail on their own, against the wind. But the Ones Above . . . they can sail the skies, sail the *stars themselves*. They know so much, and they won’t *tell* us any of it.”

She shook her head, reaching into the pocket of her skirt. “They are after something, Dusk. What interest do we hold for them? From what I’ve heard them say, there are many other worlds like ours, with cultures that cannot sail the stars. We are not unique, yet the Ones Above come back here time and time again. They *do* want something. You can see it in their eyes. . . .”

“What is that?” Dusk asked, nodding to the thing she took from

her pocket. It rested in her palm like the shell of a clam, but had a mirrorlike face on the top.

"It is a machine," she said. "Like a clock, only it never needs to be wound, and it . . . shows things."

"What things?"

"Well, it translates languages. Ours into that of the Ones Above. It also . . . shows the locations of Aviar."

"*What?*"

"It's like a map," she said. "It points the way to Aviar."

"That's how you found my camp," Dusk said, stepping toward her.

"Yes." She rubbed her thumb across the machine's surface. "We aren't supposed to have this. It was the possession of an emissary sent to work with us. He choked while eating a few months back. They *can* die, it appears, even of mundane causes. That . . . changed how I view them.

"His kind have asked after his machines, and we will have to return them soon. But this one tells us what they are after: the Aviar. The Ones Above are always fascinated with them. I think they want to find a way to trade for the birds, a way their laws will allow. They hint that we might not be safe, that not everyone Above follows their laws."

"But why did the Aviar react like they did, just now?" Dusk said, turning back to the window. "Why did . . ." *Why did I see what I saw? What I'm still seeing, to an extent?* His corpse was there, wherever he looked. Slumped by a tree outside, in the corner of the room, hanging out of the trapdoor in the roof. Sloppy. He should have closed that.

Sak had pulled into his hair like she did when a predator was near.

"There . . . is a second machine," Vathi said.

"Where?" he demanded.

"On our ship."

The direction the Aviar had looked.

"The second machine is much larger," Vathi said. "This one in my hand has limited range. The larger one can create an enormous map, one of an entire island, then *write* out a paper with a copy of that map. That map will include a dot marking every Aviar."

"And?"

"And we were going to engage the machine tonight," she said. "It

takes hours to prepare—like an oven, growing hot—before it's ready. The schedule was to turn it on tonight just after sunset so we could use it in the morning."

"The others," Dusk demanded, "they'd use it without you?"

She grimaced. "Happily. Captain Eusto probably did a dance when I didn't return from scouting. He's been worried I would take control of this expedition. But the machine isn't harmful; it merely locates Aviar."

"Did it do *that* before?" he demanded, waving toward the night. "When you last used it, did it draw the attention of all the Aviar? Discomfort them?"

"Well, no," she said. "But the moment of discomfort has passed, hasn't it? I'm sure it's nothing."

Nothing. Sak quivered on his shoulder. Dusk saw death all around him. The moment they had engaged that machine, the corpses had piled up. If they used it again, the results would be horrible. Dusk knew it. He could *feel* it.

"We're going to stop them," he said.

"What?" Vathi asked. "*Tonight?*"

"Yes," Dusk said, walking to a small hidden cabinet in the wall. He pulled it open and began to pick through the supplies inside. A second lantern. Extra oil.

"That's insane," Vathi said. "Nobody travels the islands at night."

"I've done it once before. With my uncle."

His uncle had died on that trip.

"You can't be serious, Dusk. The nightmaws are out. I've heard them."

"Nightmaws track minds," Dusk said, stuffing supplies into his pack. "They are almost completely deaf, and close to blind. If we move quickly and cut across the center of the island, we can be to your camp by morning. We can stop them from using the machine again."

"But why would we *want* to?"

He shouldered the pack. "Because if we don't, it will destroy the island."

She frowned at him, cocking her head. "You can't know that. Why do you think you know that?"

"Your Aviar will have to remain here, with that wound," he said, ignoring the question. "She would not be able to fly away if something happened to us." The same argument could be made for

Sak, but he would not be without the bird. “I will return her to you after we have stopped the machine. Come.” He walked to the floor hatch and pulled it open.

Vathi rose, but pressed back against the wall. “I’m staying here.”

“The people of your company won’t believe me,” he said. “You will have to tell them to stop. You are coming.”

Vathi licked her lips in what seemed to be a nervous habit. She glanced to the sides, looking for escape, then back at him. Right then, Dusk noticed his corpse hanging from the pegs in the tree beneath him. He jumped.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“Nothing.”

“You keep glancing to the sides,” Vathi said. “What do you think you see, Dusk?”

“We’re going. Now.”

“You’ve been alone on the island for a long time,” she said, obviously trying to make her voice soothing. “You’re upset about our arrival. You aren’t thinking clearly. I understand.”

Dusk drew in a deep breath. “Sak, show her.”

The bird launched from his shoulder, flapping across the room, landing on Vathi. She turned to the bird, frowning.

Then she gasped, falling to her knees. Vathi huddled back against the wall, eyes darting from side to side, mouth working but no words coming out. Dusk left her to it for a short time, then raised his arm. Sak returned to him on black wings, dropping a single dark feather to the floor. She settled in again on his shoulder. That much flying was difficult for her.

“What was *that*?” Vathi demanded.

“Come,” Dusk said, taking his pack and climbing down out of the room.

Vathi scrambled to the open hatch. “No. Tell me. What *was* that?”

“You saw your corpse.”

“All about me. Everywhere I looked.”

“Sak grants that talent.”

“There is no such talent.”

Dusk looked up at her, halfway down the pegs. “You have seen your death. That is what will happen if your friends use their machine. Death. All of us. The Aviar, everyone living here. I do not know why, but I know that it *will* come.”

“You’ve discovered a new Aviar,” Vathi said. “How . . .

When . . . ?”

“Hand me the lantern,” Dusk said.

Looking numb, she obeyed, handing it down. He put it into his teeth and descended the pegs to the ground. Then he raised the lantern high, looking down the slope.

The inky jungle at night. Like the depths of the ocean.

He shivered, then whistled. Kokerlii fluttered down from above, landing on his other shoulder. He would hide their minds, and with that, they had a chance. It would still not be easy. The things of the jungle relied upon mind sense, but many could still hunt by scent or other senses.

Vathi scrambled down the pegs behind him, her pack over her shoulder, the strange tube peeking out. “You have two Aviar,” she said. “You use them both at once?”

“My uncle had three.”

“How is that even possible?”

“They like trappers.” So many questions. Could she not think about what the answers might be before asking?

“We’re actually going to do this,” she said, whispering, as if to herself. “The jungle at night. I should stay. I should refuse . . .”

“You’ve seen your death if you do.”

“I’ve seen what you claim is my death. A new Aviar . . . It has been centuries.” Though her voice still sounded reluctant, she walked after him as he strode down the slope and passed his traps, entering the jungle again.

His corpse sat at the base of a tree. That made him immediately look for what could kill him here, but Sak’s senses seemed to be off. The island’s impending death was so overpowering, it seemed to be smothering smaller dangers. He might not be able to rely upon her visions until the machine was destroyed.

The thick jungle canopy swallowed them, hot, even at night; the ocean breezes didn’t reach this far inland. That left the air feeling stagnant, and it dripped with the scents of the jungle. Fungus, rotting leaves, the perfumes of flowers. The accompaniment to those scents was the sounds of an island coming alive. A constant crinkling in the underbrush, like the sound of maggots writhing in a pile of dry leaves. The lantern’s light did not seem to extend as far as it should.

Vathi pulled up close behind him. “Why did you do this before?” she whispered. “The other time you went out at night?”

More questions. But sounds, fortunately, were not too dangerous.

"I was wounded," Dusk whispered. "We had to get from one safecamp to the other to recover my uncle's store of antivenom." Because Dusk, hands trembling, had dropped the other flask.

"You survived it? Well, obviously you did, I mean. I'm surprised, is all."

She seemed to be talking to fill the air.

"They could be watching us," she said, looking into the darkness. "Nightmaws."

"They are not."

"How can you know?" she asked, voice hushed. "Anything could be out there, in that darkness."

"If the nightmaws had seen us, we'd be dead. That is how I know." He shook his head, sliding out his machete and cutting away a few branches before them. Any could hold deathants skittering across their leaves. In the dark, it would be difficult to spot them, and so brushing against foliage seemed a poor decision.

We won't be able to avoid it, he thought, leading the way down through a gully thick with mud. He had to step on stones to keep from sinking in. Vathi followed with remarkable dexterity. *We have to go quickly. I can't cut down every branch in our way.*

He hopped off a stone and onto the bank of the gully, and there passed his corpse sinking into the mud. Nearby, he spotted a second corpse, so translucent it was nearly invisible. He raised his lantern, hoping it wasn't happening again.

Others did not appear. Just these two. And the very faint image . . . yes, that was a sinkhole there. Sak chirped softly, and he fished in his pocket for a seed to give her. She had figured out how to send him help. The fainter images were immediate dangers—he would have to watch for those.

"Thank you," he whispered to her.

"That bird of yours," Vathi said, speaking softly in the gloom of night, "are there others?"

They climbed out of the gully, continuing on, crossing a krell trail in the night. He stopped them just before they wandered into a patch of deathants. Vathi looked at the trail of tiny yellow insects, moving in a straight line.

"Dusk?" she asked as they rounded the ants. "Are there others? Why haven't you brought any chicks to market?"

"I do not have any chicks."

“So you found only the one?” she asked.

Questions, questions. Buzzing around him like flies.

Don’t be foolish, he told himself, shoving down his annoyance. *You would ask the same, if you saw someone with a new Aviar.* He had tried to keep Sak a secret; for years, he hadn’t even brought her with him when he left the island. But with her hurt wing, he hadn’t wanted to abandon her.

Deep down, he’d known he couldn’t keep his secret forever. “There are many like her,” he said. “But only she has a talent to bestow.”

Vathi stopped in place as he continued to cut them a path. He turned back, looking at her alone on the new trail. He had given her the lantern to hold.

“That’s a mainlander bird,” she said. She held up the light. “I knew it was when I first saw it, and I assumed it wasn’t an Aviar, because mainlander birds can’t bestow talents.”

Dusk turned back and continued cutting.

“You brought a mainlander chick to the Pantheon,” Vathi whispered behind. “And it *gained a talent*.”

With a hack he brought down a branch, then continued on. Again, she had not asked a question, so he needed not answer.

Vathi hurried to keep up, the glow of the lantern tossing his shadow before him as she stepped up behind. “Surely someone else has tried it before. Surely . . .”

He did not know.

“But why would they?” she continued, quietly, as if to herself. “The Aviar are special. Everyone knows the separate breeds and what they do. Why assume that a fish would learn to breathe air, if raised on land? Why assume a non-Aviar would become one if raised on Patji. . . .”

They continued through the night. Dusk led them around many dangers, though he found that he needed to rely greatly upon Sak’s help. *Do not follow that stream, which has your corpse bobbing in its waters. Do not touch that tree; the bark is poisonous with rot. Turn from that path. Your corpse shows a deathant bite.*

Sak did not speak to him, but each message was clear. When he stopped to let Vathi drink from her canteen, he held Sak and found her trembling. She did not peck at him as was usual when he enclosed her in his hands.

They stood in a small clearing, pure dark all around them, the sky

shrouded in clouds. He heard distant rainfall on the trees. Not uncommon, here.

Nightmaws screeched, one then another. They only did that when they had made a kill or when they were seeking to frighten prey. Often, krell herds slept near Aviar roosts. Frighten away the birds, and you could sense the krell.

Vathi had taken out her tube. Not a scroll case—and not something scholarly at all, considering the way she held it as she poured something into its end. Once done, she raised it like one would a weapon. Beneath her feet, Dusk's body lay mangled.

He did not ask after Vathi's weapon, not even as she took some kind of short, slender spear and fitted it into the top end. No weapon could penetrate the thick skin of a nightmaw. You either avoided them or you died.

Kokerlii fluttered down to his shoulder, chirping away. He seemed confused by the darkness. Why were they out like this, at night, when birds normally made no noise?

"We must keep moving," Dusk said, placing Sak on his other shoulder and taking out his machete.

"You realize that your bird changes everything," Vathi said quietly, joining him, shouldering her pack and carrying her tube in the other hand.

"There will be a new kind of Aviar," Dusk whispered, stepping over his corpse.

"That's the *least* of it. Dusk, we assumed that chicks raised away from these islands did not develop their abilities because they were not around others to train them. We assumed that their abilities were innate, like our ability to speak—it's inborn, but we require help from others to develop it."

"That can still be true," Dusk said. "Other species, such as Sak, can merely be trained to speak."

"And your bird? Was it trained by others?"

"Perhaps." He did not say what he really thought. It was a thing of trappers. He noted a corpse on the ground before them.

It was not his.

He held up a hand immediately, stilling Vathi as she continued on to ask another question. What was *this*? The meat had been picked off much of the skeleton, and the clothing lay strewn about, ripped open by animals that feasted. Small, funguslike plants had sprouted around the ground near it, tiny red tendrils reaching up to enclose

parts of the skeleton.

He looked up at the great tree, at the foot of which rested the corpse. The flowers were not in bloom. Dusk released his breath.

"What is it?" Vathi whispered. "Deathants?"

"No. Patji's Finger."

She frowned. "Is that . . . some kind of curse?"

"It is a name," Dusk said, stepping forward carefully to inspect the corpse. Machete. Boots. Rugged gear. One of his colleagues had fallen. He *thought* he recognized the man from the clothing. An older trapper named First of the Sky.

"The name of a person?" Vathi asked, peeking over his shoulder.

"The name of a tree," Dusk said, poking at the corpse's clothing, careful of insects that might be lurking inside. "Raise the lamp."

"I've never heard of that tree," she said skeptically.

"They are only on Patji."

"I have read a lot about the flora on these islands. . . ."

"Here you are a child. Light."

She sighed, raising it for him. He used a stick to prod at pockets on the ripped clothing. This man had been killed by a tuskrun pack, larger predators—almost as large as a man—that prowled mostly by day. Their movement patterns were predictable unless one happened across one of Patji's Fingers in bloom.

There. He found a small book in the man's pocket. Dusk raised it, then backed away. Vathi peered over his shoulder. Homeislers stood so *close* to each other. Did she need to stand right by his elbow?

He checked the first pages, finding a list of dates. Yes, judging by the last date written down, this man was only a few days dead. The pages after that detailed the locations of Sky's safecamps, along with explanations of the traps guarding each one. The last page contained the farewell.

I am First of the Sky, taken by Patji at last. I have a brother on Suluko. Care for them, rival.

Few words. Few words were good. Dusk carried a book like this himself, and he had said even less on his last page.

"He wants you to care for his family?" Vathi asked.

"Don't be stupid," Dusk said, tucking the book away. "His birds."

"That's sweet," Vathi said. "I had always heard that trappers were incredibly territorial."

"We are," he said, noting how she said it. Again, her tone made it seem as if she considered trappers to be like animals. "But our birds

might die without care—they are accustomed to humans. Better to give them to a rival than to let them die."

"Even if that rival is the one who killed you?" Vathi asked. "The traps you set, the ways you try to interfere with one another . . ."

"It is our way."

"That is an awful excuse," she said, looking up at the tree.

She was right.

The tree was massive, with drooping fronds. At the end of each one was a large closed blossom, as long as two hands put together. "You don't seem worried," she noted, "though the plant seems to have killed that man."

"These are only dangerous when they bloom."

"Spores?" she asked.

"No." He picked up the fallen machete, but left the rest of Sky's things alone. Let Patji claim him. Father did so like to murder his children. Dusk continued onward, leading Vathi, ignoring his corpse draped across a log.

"Dusk?" Vathi asked, raising the lantern and hurrying to him. "If not spores, then how does the tree kill?"

"So many questions."

"My life is about questions," she replied. "And about answers. If my people are going to work on this island . . ."

He hacked at some plants with the machete.

"It *is* going to happen," she said, more softly. "I'm sorry, Dusk. You can't stop the world from changing. Perhaps my expedition will be defeated, but others will come."

"Because of the Ones Above," he snapped.

"They may spur it," Vathi said. "Truly, when we finally convince them we are developed enough to be traded with, we will sail the stars as they do. But change will happen even without them. The world is progressing. One man cannot slow it, no matter how determined he is."

He stopped in the path.

You cannot stop the tides from changing, Dusk. No matter how determined you are. His mother's words. Some of the last he remembered from her.

Dusk continued on his way. Vathi followed. He would need her, though a treacherous piece of him whispered that she would be easy to end. With her would go her questions, and more importantly her answers. The ones he suspected she was very close

to discovering.

You cannot change it. . . .

He could not. He hated that it was so. He wanted so badly to protect this island, as his kind had done for centuries. He worked this jungle, he loved its birds, was fond of its scents and sounds—despite all else. How he wished he could prove to Patji that he and the others were worthy of these shores.

Perhaps. Perhaps then . . .

Bah. Well, killing this woman would not provide any real protection for the island. Besides, had he sunk so low that he would murder a helpless scribe in cold blood? He would not even do that to another trapper, unless they approached his camp and did not retreat.

"The blossoms can think," he found himself saying as he turned them away from a mound that showed the tuskrun pack had been rooting here. "The Fingers of Patji. The trees themselves are not dangerous, even when blooming—but they attract predators, imitating the thoughts of a wounded animal that is full of pain and worry."

Vathi gasped. "A *plant*," she said, "that broadcasts a mental signature? Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"I need one of those blossoms." The light shook as she turned to go back.

Dusk spun and caught her by the arm. "We must keep moving."

"But—"

"You will have another chance." He took a deep breath. "Your people will soon infest this island like maggots on carrion. You will see other trees. Tonight, we must *go*. Dawn approaches."

He let go of her and turned back to his work. He had judged her wise, for a homeisler. Perhaps she would listen.

She did. She followed behind.

Patji's Fingers. First of the Sky, the dead trapper, should not have died in that place. Truly, the trees were not that dangerous. They lived by opening many blossoms and attracting predators to come feast. The predators would then fight one another, and the tree would feed off the corpses. Sky must have stumbled across a tree as it was beginning to flower, and got caught in what came.

His Aviar had not been enough to shield so many open blossoms. Who would have expected a death like that? After years on the

island, surviving much more terrible dangers, to be caught by those simple flowers. It almost seemed a mockery, on Patji's part, of the poor man.

Dusk and Vathi's path continued, and soon grew steeper. They'd need to go uphill for a while before crossing to the downward slope that would lead to the other side of the island. Their trail, fortunately, would avoid Patji's main peak—the point of the wedge that jutted up the easternmost side of the island. His camp had been near the south, and Vathi's would be to the northeast, letting them skirt around the base of the wedge before arriving on the other beach.

They fell into a rhythm, and she was quiet for a time. Eventually, atop a particularly steep incline, he nodded for a break and squatted down to drink from his canteen. On Patji one did not simply sit, without care, upon a stump or log to rest.

Consumed by worry, and not a little frustration, he didn't notice what Vathi was doing until it was too late. She'd found something tucked into a branch—a long colorful feather. A mating plume.

Dusk leaped to his feet.

Vathi reached up toward the lower branches of the tree.

A set of spikes on ropes dropped from a nearby tree as Vathi pulled the branch. They swung down as Dusk reached her, one arm thrown in the way. A spike hit, the long, thin nail ripping into his skin and jutting out the other side, bloodied, and stopping a hair from Vathi's cheek.

She screamed.

Many predators on Patji were hard of hearing, but still that wasn't wise. Dusk didn't care. He yanked the spike from his skin, unconcerned with the bleeding for now, and checked the other spikes on the drop-rope trap.

No poison. Blessedly, they had not been poisoned.

"Your arm!" Vathi said.

He grunted. It didn't hurt. Yet. She began fishing in her pack for a bandage, and he accepted her ministrations without complaint or groan, even as the pain came upon him.

"I'm so sorry!" Vathi sputtered. "I found a mating plume! That meant an Aviar nest, so I thought to look in the tree. Have we stumbled across another trapper's safecamp?"

She was babbling out words as she worked. Seemed appropriate. When he grew nervous, he grew even more quiet. She would do the

opposite.

She was good with a bandage, again surprising him. The wound had not hit any major arteries. He would be fine, though using his left hand would not be easy. This would be an annoyance. When she was done, looking sheepish and guilty, he reached down and picked up the mating plume she had dropped.

"This," he said with a harsh whisper, holding it up before her, "is the symbol of your ignorance. On the Pantheon Islands, nothing is easy, nothing is simple. That plume was placed by another trapper to catch someone who does not deserve to be here, someone who thought to find an easy prize. You cannot be that person. Never move without asking yourself, is this too easy?"

She paled. Then she took the feather in her fingers.

"Come."

He turned and walked on their way. That was the speech for an apprentice, he realized. Upon their first major mistake. A ritual among trappers. What had possessed him to give it to her?

She followed behind, head bowed, appropriately shamed. She didn't realize the honor he had just paid her, if unconsciously. They walked onward, an hour or more passing.

By the time she spoke, for some reason, he almost welcomed the words breaking upon the sounds of the jungle. "I'm sorry."

"You need not be sorry," he said. "Only careful."

"I understand." She took a deep breath, following behind him on the path. "And I *am* sorry. Not just about your arm. About this island. About what is coming. I think it inevitable, but I do wish that it did not mean the end of such a grand tradition."

"I . . ."

Words. He hated trying to find words.

"It . . . was not dusk when I was born," he finally said, then hacked down a swampvine and held his breath against the noxious fumes that it released toward him. They were only dangerous for a few moments.

"Excuse me?" Vathi asked, keeping her distance from the swampvine. "You were born . . ."

"My mother did not name me for the time of day. I was named because my mother saw the dusk of our people. The sun will soon set on us, she often told me." He looked back to Vathi, letting her pass him and enter a small clearing.

Oddly, she smiled at him. Why had he found those words to

speak? He followed into the clearing, concerned at himself. He had not given those words to his uncle; only his parents knew the source of his name.

He was not certain why he'd told this scribe from an evil company. But . . . it did feel good to have said them.

A nightmaw broke through between two trees behind Vathi.

The enormous beast would have been as tall as a tree if it had stood upright. Instead it leaned forward in a prowling posture, powerful legs behind bearing most of its weight, its two clawed forelegs ripping up the ground. It reached forward its long neck, beak open, razor-sharp and deadly. It looked like a bird—in the same way that a wolf looked like a lapdog.

He threw his machete. An instinctive reaction, for he did not have time for thought. He did not have time for fear. That snapping beak—as tall as a door—would have the two of them dead in moments.

His machete glanced off the beak and actually cut the creature on the side of the head. That drew its attention, making it hesitate for just a moment. Dusk leaped for Vathi. She stepped back from him, setting the butt of her tube against the ground. He needed to pull her away, to—

The explosion deafened him.

Smoke bloomed around Vathi, who stood—wide eyed—having dropped the lantern, oil spilling. The sudden sound stunned Dusk, and he almost collided with her as the nightmaw lurched and fell, skidding, the ground *thumping* from the impact.

Dusk found himself on the ground. He scrambled to his feet, backing away from the twitching nightmaw mere inches from him. Lit by flickering lanternlight, it was all leathery skin that was bumpy like that of a bird who had lost her feathers.

It was dead. Vathi had killed it.

She said something.

Vathi had *killed* a nightmaw.

"Dusk!" Her voice seemed distant.

He raised a hand to his forehead, which had belatedly begun to prickle with sweat. His wounded arm throbbed, but he was otherwise tense. He felt as if he should be running. He had never wanted to be so close to one of these. *Never.*

She'd actually killed it.

He turned toward her, his eyes wide. Vathi was trembling, but she covered it well. "So, that worked," she said. "We weren't certain

it would, even though we'd prepared these specifically for the nightmaws."

"It's like a cannon," Dusk said. "Like from one of the ships, only in your *hands*."

"Yes."

He turned back toward the beast. Actually, it *wasn't* dead, not completely. It twitched, and let out a plaintive screech that shocked him, even with his hearing muffled. The weapon had fired that spear right into the beast's chest.

The nightmaw quaked and thrashed a weak leg.

"We could kill them all," Dusk said. He turned, then rushed over to Vathi, taking her with his right hand, the arm that wasn't wounded. "With those weapons, we could kill them *all*. Every nightmaw. Maybe the shadows too!"

"Well, yes, it has been discussed. However, they are important parts of the ecosystem on these islands. Removing the apex predators could have undesirable results."

"Undesirable results?" Dusk ran his left hand through his hair. "They'd be gone. All of them! I don't care what other problems you think it would cause. They would all be *dead*."

Vathi snorted, picking up the lantern and stamping out the fires it had started. "I thought trappers were connected to nature."

"We are. That's how I know we would all be better off without any of these things."

"You are disabusing me of many romantic notions about your kind, Dusk," she said, circling the dying beast.

Dusk whistled, holding up his arm. Kokerlii fluttered down from high branches; in the chaos and explosion, Dusk had not seen the bird fly away. Sak still clung to his shoulder with a death grip, her claws digging into his skin through the cloth. He hadn't noticed. Kokerlii landed on his arm and gave an apologetic chirp.

"It wasn't your fault," Dusk said soothingly. "They prowl the night. Even when they cannot sense our minds, they can smell us." Their sense of smell was said to be incredible. This one had come up the trail behind them; it must have crossed their path and followed it.

Dangerous. His uncle always claimed the nightmaws were growing smarter, that they knew they could not hunt men only by their minds. *I should have taken us across more streams,* Dusk thought, reaching up and rubbing Sak's neck to soothe her. *There*

just isn't time. . . .

His corpse lay wherever he looked. Draped across a rock, hanging from the vines of trees, slumped beneath the dying nightmaw's claw . . .

The beast trembled once more, then amazingly it lifted its gruesome head and let out a last screech. Not as loud as those that normally sounded in the night, but bone-chilling and horrid. Dusk stepped back despite himself, and Sak chirped nervously.

Other nightmaw screeches rose in the night, distant. That sound . . . he had been trained to recognize that sound as the sound of death.

"We're going," he said, stalking across the ground and pulling Vathi away from the dying beast, which had lowered its head and fallen silent.

"Dusk?" She did not resist as he pulled her away.

One of the other nightmaws sounded again in the night. Was it closer? *Oh, Patji, please,* Dusk thought. *No. Not this.*

He pulled her faster, reaching for his machete at his side, but it was not there. He had thrown it. He took out the one he had gathered from his fallen rival, then dragged her out of the clearing, back into the jungle, moving quickly. He could no longer worry about brushing against deathants.

A greater danger was coming.

The calls of death came again.

"Are those getting *closer*?" Vathi asked.

Dusk did not answer. It was a question, but he did not know the answer. At least his hearing was recovering. He released her hand, moving more quickly, almost at a trot—faster than he ever wanted to go through the jungle, day or night.

"Dusk!" Vathi hissed. "Will they come? To the call of the dying one? Is that something they do?"

"How should I know? I have never known one of them to be killed before." He saw the tube, again carried over her shoulder, lit by the light of the lantern she carried.

That gave him pause, though his instincts screamed at him to keep moving and he felt a fool. "Your weapon," he said. "You can use it again?"

"Yes," she said. "Once more."

"*Once* more?"

A half dozen screeches sounded in the night.

“Yes,” she replied. “I only brought three spears and enough powder for three shots. I tried firing one at the shadow. It didn’t do much.”

He spoke no further, ignoring his wounded arm—the bandage was in need of changing—and towing her through the jungle. The calls came again and again. Agitated. How did one escape nightmaws? His Aviar clung to him, a bird on each shoulder. He had to leap over his corpse as they traversed a gulch and came up the other side.

How do you escape them? he thought, remembering his uncle’s training. *You don’t draw their attention in the first place!*

They were fast. Kokerlii would hide his mind, but if they picked up his trail at the dead one . . .

Water. He stopped in the night, turning right, then left. Where would he find a stream? Patji was an island. Fresh water came from rainfall, mostly. The largest lake . . . the only one . . . was up the wedge. Toward the peak. Along the eastern side, the island rose to some heights with cliffs on all sides. Rainfall collected there, in Patji’s Eye. The river was his tears.

It was a dangerous place to go with Vathi in tow. Their path had skirted the slope up the heights, heading across the island toward the northern beach. They were close. . . .

Those screeches behind spurred him on. Patji would just have to forgive him for what came next. Dusk seized Vathi’s hand and towed her in a more eastern direction. She did not complain, though she did keep looking over her shoulder.

The screeches grew closer.

He ran. He ran as he had never expected to do on Patji, wild and reckless. Leaping over troughs, around fallen logs coated in moss. Through the dark underbrush, scaring away meekers and startling Aviar slumbering in the branches above. It was foolish. It was crazy. But did it matter? Somehow, he knew those other things would not claim him. The kings of Patji hunted him; lesser dangers would not dare steal from their betters.

Vathi followed with difficulty. Those skirts were trouble, but she caught up to him each time Dusk had to occasionally stop and cut their way through underbrush. Urgent, frantic. He expected her to keep up, and she did. A piece of him—buried deep beneath the terror—was impressed. This woman would have made a fantastic trapper. Instead she would probably destroy all trappers.

He froze as screeches sounded behind, so close. Vathi gasped, and Dusk turned back to his work. Not far to go. He hacked through a dense patch of undergrowth and ran on, sweat streaming down the sides of his face. Jostling light came from Vathi's lantern behind; the scene before him was one of horrific shadows dancing on the jungle's boughs, leaves, ferns, and rocks.

This is your fault, Patji, he thought with an unexpected fury. The screeches seemed almost on top of him. Was that breaking brush he could hear behind? *We are your priests, and yet you hate us! You hate all.*

Dusk broke from the jungle and out onto the banks of the river. Small by mainland standards, but it would do. He led Vathi right into it, splashing into the cold waters.

He turned upstream. What else could he do? Downstream would lead closer to those sounds, the calls of death.

Of the Dusk, he thought. *Of the Dusk.*

The waters came only to their calves, bitter cold. The coldest water on the island, though he did not know why. They slipped and scrambled as they ran, best they could, upriver. They passed through some narrows, with lichen-covered rock walls on either side twice as tall as a man, then burst out into the basin.

A place men did not go. A place he had visited only once. A cool emerald lake rested here, sequestered.

Dusk towed Vathi to the side, out of the river, toward some brush. Perhaps she would not see. He huddled down with her, raising a finger to his lips, then turned down the light of the lantern she still held. Nightmaws could not see well, but perhaps the dim light would help. In more ways than one.

They waited there, on the shore of the small lake, hoping that the water had washed away their scent—hoping the nightmaws would grow confused or distracted. For one thing about this place was that the basin had steep walls, and there was no way out other than the river. If the nightmaws came up it, Dusk and Vathi would be trapped.

Screeches sounded. The creatures had reached the river. Dusk waited in near darkness, and so squeezed his eyes shut. He prayed to Patji, whom he loved, whom he hated.

Vathi gasped softly. "What . . . ?"

So she had seen. Of course she had. She was a seeker, a learner. A questioner.

Why must men ask so many questions?

"Dusk! There are Aviar here, in these branches! Hundreds of them." She spoke in a hushed, frightened tone. Even as they awaited death itself, she saw and could not help speaking. "Have you seen them? What is this place?" She hesitated. "So many juveniles. Barely able to fly . . ."

"They come here," he whispered. "Every bird from every island. In their youth, they must come here."

He opened his eyes, looking up. He had turned down the lantern, but it was still bright enough to see them roosting there. Some stirred at the light and the sound. They stirred more as the nightmaws screeched below.

Sak chirped on his shoulder, terrified. Kokerlii, for once, had nothing to say.

"Every bird from every island . . ." Vathi said, putting it together. "They all come here, to this place. Are you certain?"

"Yes." It was a thing that trappers knew. You could not capture a bird before it had visited Patji.

Otherwise it would be able to bestow no talent.

"They come here," she said. "We knew they migrated between islands. . . . Why do they come here?"

Was there any point in holding back now? She would figure it out. Still, he did not speak. Let her do so.

"They gain their talents here, don't they?" she asked. "How? Is it where they are trained? Is this how you made a bird who was not an Aviar into one? You brought a hatchling here, and then . . ." She frowned, raising her lantern. "I recognize those trees. They are the ones you called Patji's Fingers."

A dozen of them grew here, the largest concentration on the island. And beneath them, their fruit littered the ground. Much of it eaten, some of it only halfway so, bites taken out by birds of all stripes.

Vathi saw him looking, and frowned. "The fruit?" she asked.

"Worms," he whispered in reply.

A light seemed to go on in her eyes. "It's not the birds. It never has been . . . it's a parasite. They carry a parasite that bestows talents! That's why those raised away from the islands cannot gain the abilities, and why a mainland bird you brought here could."

"Yes."

"This changes everything, Dusk. Everything."

"Yes."

Of the Dusk. Born during that dusk, or bringer of it? What had he done?

Downriver, the nightmaw screeches drew closer. They had decided to search upriver. They were clever, more clever than men off the islands thought them to be. Vathi gasped, turning toward the small river canyon.

"Isn't this dangerous?" she whispered. "The trees are blooming. The nightmaws will come! But no. So many Aviar. They can hide those blossoms, like they do a man's mind?"

"No," he said. "All minds in this place are invisible, always, regardless of Aviar."

"But . . . how? Why? The worms?"

Dusk didn't know, and for now didn't care. *I am trying to protect you, Patji!* Dusk looked toward Patji's Fingers. *I need to stop the men and their device. I know it! Why? Why do you hunt me?*

Perhaps it was because he knew so much. Too much. More than any man had known. For he had asked questions.

Men. And their questions.

"They're coming up the river, aren't they?" she asked.

The answer seemed obvious. He did not reply.

"No," she said, standing. "I won't die with this knowledge, Dusk. I *won't.* There must be a way."

"There is," he said, standing beside her. He took a deep breath. *So I finally pay for it.* He took Sak carefully in his hand, and placed her on Vathi's shoulder. He pried Kokerlii free too.

"What are you doing?" Vathi asked.

"I will go as far as I can," Dusk said, handing Kokerlii toward her. The bird bit with annoyance at his hands, although never strong enough to draw blood. "You will need to hold him. He will try to follow me."

"No, wait. We can hide in the lake, they—"

"They will find us!" Dusk said. "It isn't deep enough by far to hide us."

"But you can't—"

"They are nearly here, woman!" he said, forcing Kokerlii into her hands. "The men of the company will not listen to me if I tell them to turn off the device. You are smart, you can make them stop. You can reach them. With Kokerlii you can reach them. Be ready to go."

She looked at him, stunned, but she seemed to realize that there

was no other way. She stood, holding Kokerlii in two hands as he pulled out the journal of First of the Sky, then his own book that listed where his Aviar were, and tucked them into her pack. Finally, he stepped back into the river. He could hear a rushing sound downstream. He would have to go quickly to reach the end of the canyon before they arrived. If he could draw them out into the jungle even a short ways to the south, Vathi could slip away.

As he entered the stream, his visions of death finally vanished. No more corpses bobbing in the water, lying on the banks. Sak had realized what was happening.

She gave a final chirp.

He started to run.

One of Patji's Fingers, growing right next to the mouth of the canyon, was blooming.

"Wait!"

He should not have stopped as Vathi yelled at him. He should have continued on, for time was so slim. However, the sight of that flower—along with her yell—made him hesitate.

The flower . . .

It struck him as it must have struck Vathi. An idea. Vathi ran for her pack, letting go of Kokerlii, who immediately flew to his shoulder and started chirping at him in annoyed chastisement. Dusk didn't listen. He yanked the flower off—it was as large as a man's head, with a large bulging part at the center.

It was invisible in this basin, like they all were.

"A flower that can think," Vathi said, breathing quickly, fishing in her pack. "A flower that can draw the attention of predators."

Dusk pulled out his rope as she brought out her weapon and prepared it. He lashed the flower to the end of the spear sticking out slightly from the tube.

Nightmaw screeches echoed up the cavern. He could see their shadows, hear them splashing.

He stumbled back from Vathi as she crouched down, set the weapon's butt against the ground, and pulled a lever at the base.

The explosion, once again, nearly deafened him.

Aviar all around the rim of the basin screeched and called in fright, taking wing. A storm of feathers and flapping ensued, and through the middle of it, Vathi's spear shot into the air, flower on the end. It arced out over the canyon into the night.

Dusk grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her back along the

river, into the lake itself. They slipped into the shallow water, Kokerlii on his shoulder, Sak on hers. They left the lantern burning, giving a quiet light to the suddenly empty basin.

The lake was not deep. Two or three feet. Even crouching, it didn't cover them completely.

The nightmaws stopped in the canyon. His lanternlight showed a couple of them in the shadows, large as huts, turning and watching the sky. They were smart, but like the meekers, not as smart as men.

Patji, Dusk thought. *Patji, please . . .*

The nightmaws turned back down the canyon, following the mental signature broadcast by the flowering plant. And, as Dusk watched, his corpse bobbing in the water nearby grew increasingly translucent.

Then faded away entirely.

Dusk counted to a hundred, then slipped from the waters. Vathi, sodden in her skirts, did not speak as she grabbed the lantern. They left the weapon, its shots expended.

The calls from the nightmaws grew farther and farther away as Dusk led the way out of the canyon, then directly north, slightly downslope. He kept expecting the screeches to turn and follow.

They did not.

The company fortress was a horridly impressive sight. A work of logs and cannons right at the edge of the water, guarded by an enormous iron-hulled ship. Smoke rose from it, the burning of morning cook fires. A short distance away, what must have been a dead shadow rotted in the sun, its mountainous carcass draped half in the water, half out.

He didn't see his own corpse anywhere, though on the final leg of their trip to the fortress he had seen it several times. Always in a place of immediate danger. Sak's visions had returned to normal.

Dusk turned back to the fortress, which he did not enter. He preferred to remain on the rocky, familiar shore—perhaps twenty feet from the entrance—his wounded arm aching as the company people rushed out through the gate to meet Vathi. Their scouts on the upper walls kept careful watch on Dusk. A trapper was not to be trusted.

Even standing here, some twenty feet from the wide wooden gates into the fort, he could smell how wrong the place was. It was stuffed with the scents of men—sweaty bodies, the smell of oil, and other, newer scents that he recognized from his recent trips to the homeisles. Scents that made him feel like an outsider among his own people.

The company men wore sturdy clothing, trousers like Dusk's but far better tailored, shirts and rugged jackets. Jackets? In Patji's heat? These people bowed to Vathi, showing her more deference than Dusk would have expected. They drew hands from shoulder to shoulder as they started speaking—a symbol of respect. Foolishness. Anyone could make a gesture like that; it didn't mean anything. True respect included far more than a hand waved in the air.

But they did treat her like more than a simple scribe. She was better placed in the company than he'd assumed. Not his problem anymore, regardless.

Vathi looked at him, then back at her people. "We must hurry to the machine," she said to them. "The one from Above. We must turn it off."

Good. She would do her part. Dusk turned to walk away. Should he give words at parting? He'd never felt the need before. But today, it felt . . . wrong not to say something.

He started walking. Words. He had never been good with words.

"Turn it off?" one of the men said from behind. "What do you mean, Lady Vathi?"

"You don't need to feign innocence, Winds," Vathi said. "I know you turned it on in my absence."

"But we didn't."

Dusk paused. What? The man sounded sincere. But then, Dusk was no expert on human emotions. From what he'd seen of people from the homeisles, they could fake emotion as easily as they faked a gesture of respect.

"What *did* you do, then?" Vathi asked them.

"We . . . opened it."

Oh no . . .

"Why would you do that?" Vathi asked.

Dusk turned to regard them, but he didn't need to hear the answer. The answer was before him, in the vision of a dead island he'd misinterpreted.

"We figured," the man said, "that we should see if we could

puzzle out how the machine worked. Vathi, the insides . . . they're complex beyond what we could have imagined. But there are seeds there. Things we could—"

"No!" Dusk said, rushing toward them.

One of the sentries above planted an arrow at his feet. He lurched to a stop, looking wildly from Vathi up toward the walls. Couldn't they see? The bulge in mud that announced a deathant den. The game trail. The distinctive curl of a cutaway vine. Wasn't it *obvious*?

"It will destroy us," Dusk said. "Don't seek . . . Don't you see . . . ?"

For a moment, they all just stared at him. He had a chance. Words. He needed *words*.

"That machine is deathants!" he said. "A den, a . . . Bah!" How could he explain?

He couldn't. In his anxiety, words fled him, like Aviar fluttering away into the night.

The others finally started moving, pulling Vathi toward the safety of their treasonous fortress.

"You said the corpses are gone," Vathi said as she was ushered through the gates. "We've succeeded. I will see that the machine is not engaged on this trip! I promise you this, Dusk!"

"But," he cried back, "it was never *meant* to be engaged!"

The enormous wooden gates of the fortress creaked closed, and he lost sight of her. Dusk cursed. Why hadn't he been able to explain?

Because he didn't know how to talk. For once in his life, that seemed to matter.

Furious, frustrated, he stalked away from that place and its awful smells. Halfway to the tree line, however, he stopped, then turned. Sak fluttered down, landing on his shoulder and cooing softly.

Questions. Those questions wanted into his brain.

Instead he yelled at the guards. He demanded they return Vathi to him. He even pled.

Nothing happened. They wouldn't speak to him. Finally, he started to feel foolish. He turned back toward the trees, and continued on his way. His assumptions were probably wrong. After all, the corpses *were* gone. Everything could go back to normal.

. . . Normal. Could anything *ever* be normal with that fortress looming behind him? He shook his head, entering the canopy. The dense humidity of Patji's jungle should have calmed him.

Instead it annoyed him. As he started the trek toward another of his safecamps, he was so distracted that he could have been a youth, his first time on Sori. He almost stumbled straight onto a gaping deathant den; he didn't even notice the vision Sak sent. This time, dumb luck saved him as he stubbed his toe on something, looked down, and only then spotted both corpse and crack crawling with motes of yellow.

He growled, then sneered. "Still you try to kill me?" he shouted, looking up at the canopy. "Patji!"

Silence.

"The ones who protect you are the ones you try hardest to kill," Dusk shouted. "Why!"

The words were lost in the jungle. It consumed them.

"You deserve this, Patji," he said. "What is coming to you. You *deserve to be destroyed!*"

He breathed out in gasps, sweating, satisfied at having finally said those things. Perhaps there was a purpose for words. Part of him, as traitorous as Vathi and her company, was *glad* that Patji would fall to their machines.

Of course, then the company itself would fall. To the Ones Above. His entire people. The world itself.

He bowed his head in the shadows of the canopy, sweat dripping down the sides of his face. Then he fell to his knees, heedless of the nest just three strides away.

Sak nuzzled into his hair. Above, in the branches, Kokerlii chirped uncertainly.

"It's a trap, you see," he whispered. "The Ones Above have rules. They can't trade with us until we're advanced enough. Just like a man can't, in good conscience, bargain with a child until they are grown. And so, they have left their machines for us to discover, to prod at and poke. The dead man was a ruse. Vathi was *meant* to have those machines.

"There will be explanations, left as if carelessly, for us to dig into and learn. And at some point in the near future, we will build something like one of their machines. We will have grown more quickly than we should have. We will be childlike still, ignorant, but the laws from Above will let these visitors trade with us. And then, they will take this land for themselves."

That was what he should have said. Protecting Patji was impossible. Protecting the Aviar was impossible. Protecting their

entire *world* was impossible. Why hadn't he explained it?

Perhaps because it wouldn't have done any good. As Vathi had said . . . progress would come. If you wanted to call it that.

Dusk had arrived.

Sak left his shoulder, winging away. Dusk looked after her, then cursed. She did not land nearby. Though flying was difficult for her, she fluttered on, disappearing from his sight.

"Sak?" he asked, rising and stumbling after the Aviar. He fought back the way he had come, following Sak's squawks. A few moments later, he lurched out of the jungle.

Vathi stood on the rocks before her fortress.

Dusk hesitated at the brim of the jungle. Vathi was alone, and even the sentries had retreated. Had they cast her out? No. He could see that the gate was cracked, and some people watched from inside.

Sak had landed on Vathi's shoulder down below. Dusk frowned, reaching his hand to the side and letting Kokerlii land on his arm. Then he strode forward, calmly making his way down the rocky shore, until he was standing just before Vathi.

She'd changed into a new dress, though there were still snarls in her hair. She smelled of flowers.

And her eyes were terrified.

He'd traveled the darkness with her. Had faced nightmaws. Had seen her near to death, and she had not looked this worried.

"What?" he asked, finding his voice hoarse.

"We found instructions in the machine," Vathi whispered. "A manual on its workings, left there as if accidentally by someone who worked on it before. The manual is in their language, but the smaller machine I have . . ."

"It translates."

"The manual details how the machine was constructed," Vathi says. "It's so complex I can barely comprehend it, but it seems to explain concepts and ideas, not just give the workings of the machine."

"And are you not happy?" he asked. "You will have your flying machines soon, Vathi. Sooner than anyone could have imagined."

Wordless, she held something up. A single feather—a mating plume. She had kept it.

"Never move without asking yourself, is this too easy?" she whispered. "You said it was a trap as I was pulled away. When we

found the manual, I . . . Oh, Dusk. They are planning to do to us what . . . what we are doing to Patji, aren't they?"

Dusk nodded.

"We'll lose it all. We can't fight them. They'll find an excuse, they'll *seize* the Aviar. It makes perfect sense. The Aviar use the worms. We use the Aviar. The Ones Above use us. It's inevitable, isn't it?"

Yes, he thought. He opened his mouth to say it, and Sak chirped. He frowned and turned back toward the island. Jutting from the ocean, arrogant. Destructive.

Patji. Father.

And finally, at long last, Dusk understood.

"No," he whispered.

"But—"

He undid his pants pocket, then reached deeply into it, digging around. Finally, he pulled something out. The remnants of a feather, just the shaft now. A mating plume that his uncle had given him, so many years ago, when he'd first fallen into a trap on Sori. He held it up, remembering the speech he'd been given. Like every trapper.

This is the symbol of your ignorance. Nothing is easy, nothing is simple.

Vathi held hers. Old and new.

"No, they will not have us," Dusk said. "We will see through their traps, and we will not fall for their tricks. For we have been trained by the Father himself for this very day."

She stared at his feather, then up at him.

"Do you really think that?" she asked. "They are cunning."

"They may be cunning," he said. "But they have not lived on Patji. We will gather the other trappers. We will not let ourselves be taken in."

She nodded hesitantly, and some of the fear seemed to leave her. She turned and waved for those behind her to open the gates to the building. Again, the scents of mankind washed over him.

Vathi looked back, then held out her hand to him. "You will help, then?"

His corpse appeared at her feet, and Sak chirped warningly. Danger. Yes, the path ahead would include much danger.

Dusk took Vathi's hand and stepped into the fortress anyway.

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Isaac

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SIXTH OF THE DUSK

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BRANDON SANDERSON

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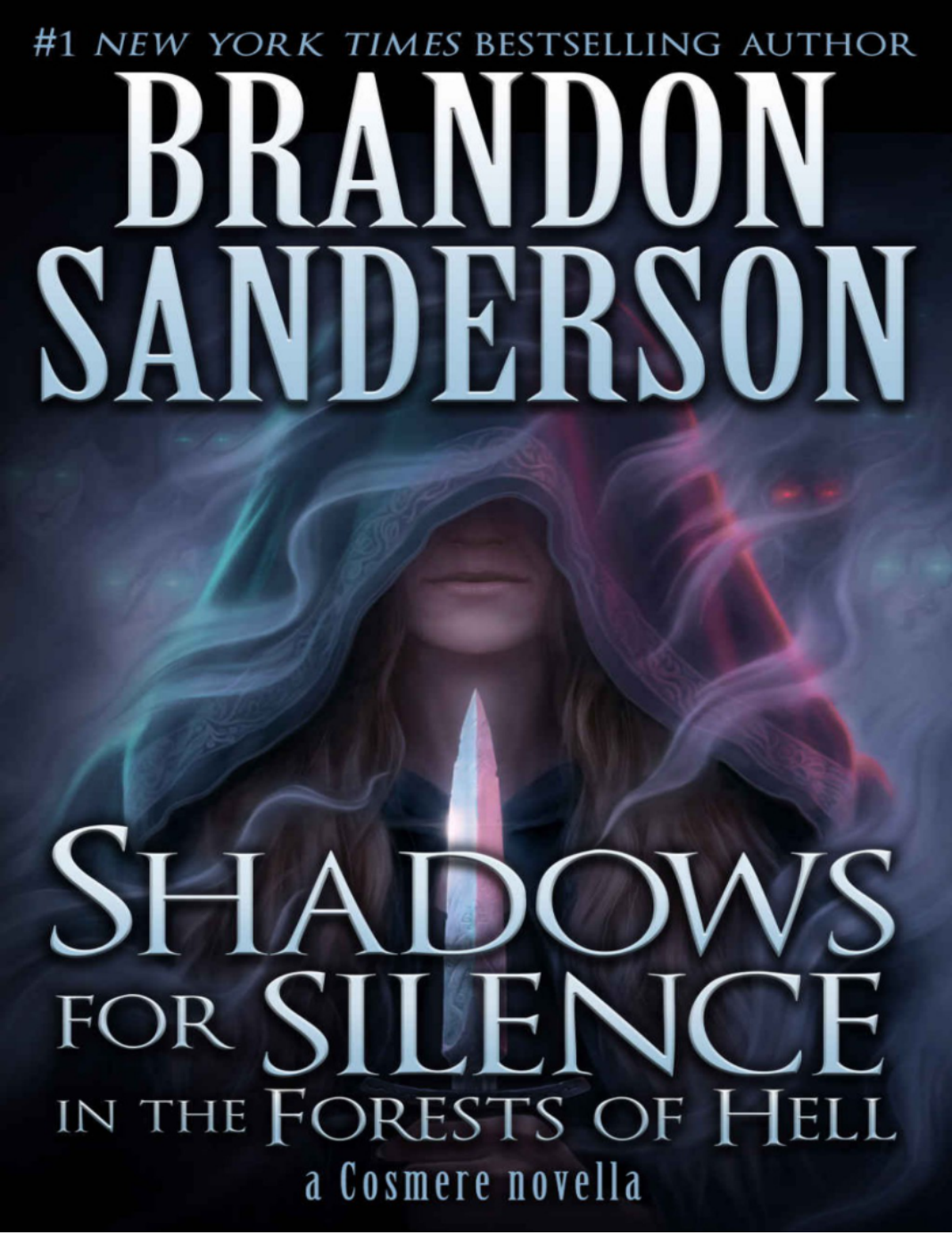

SHADOWS FOR SILENCE IN THE FORESTS OF HELL

a Cosmere novella

Shadows for Silence in the Forests of Hell

a Cosmere novella

Brandon Sanderson

PREFACE

When George R. R. Martin approached me to ask if I'd be willing to contribute a story to *Dangerous Women*, I was ecstatic. George is known best for his Westeros books, but he is also an excellent editor, having put together many anthologies. His recent themed anthologies with Gardner Dozois have become something of a "Who's Who" in the fantasy and science fiction world. It was a real honor to be invited.

After he told me the theme was "dangerous women," I at first thought of *Perfect State*, another novella of mine. I had a very rough draft of that done, but hadn't yet submitted it anywhere for publication. I sent that to George and Gardner, and they felt it wasn't on theme enough, and asked if I had anything else.

I didn't, not yet, but something *had* happened recently that had planted a seed in my mind. I had been involved in some genealogy work, and had run across the name of a Puritan woman named Silence.

That intrigued me. Who would name their daughter *Silence*, and for what reason? *Charity* I can get. *Faith* totally makes sense. But *Silence*? Perhaps she was late in the birth order, and her parents were really hoping to sleep through the nights this time.

Either way, the name stuck with me.

I'd had the idea for Threnody, the Cosmere world where a group of pilgrimesque people fled the Old World because it was overrun by a terrible evil long ago. It was actually a very early Cosmere world, developed somewhere around 1999 or 2000. (Though the name didn't get assigned to it until Isaac gave a suggestion upon reading this novella.) Having an intriguing Puritan name and a world that took inspiration from early American history seemed a ready-made match, but then I had to ask myself, how was Silence going to be dangerous?

I was worried that the anthology was going to be stuffed full of women either in the "femme fatal" vein or the "I wear black leather and kick demon butt" vein. I've often felt that we, in fantasy, sometimes do a poor job of representing people (both male and female) who are powerful and capable in ways other than their ability to stand in a fight. Yes, giving a woman a sword is one way to make her dangerous, but I resist making every powerful woman into one who has become so by forcing her way into a traditionally male-dominated realm of face-to-face combat.

The world was mostly formed in my head, though over the years I'd added the idea of the shades for various reasons. One was to show off

a few hints regarding the Cosmere afterlife, and another came during my initial research for the Stormlight Archive, where I read a lot about classical Hebrew life and philosophy. The original idea for Threnody was to make a system of magical rules with their roots in the Law of Moses and Jewish tradition. (Not mixing meat with milk, not kindling flames after nightfall on the Sabbath, etc.) Many of those rules transformed over the years, leaving their roots behind in the same way that the Stormlight magic system left behind its roots in the fundamental forces of physics. But you can see those hints still having an influence on the tone and setting of this story.

The intersection of these ideas developed into this story, one that soon became one of my favorite Cosmere tales. I hope you enjoy it! (And no, for those searching, Hoid does not make an appearance. Unfortunately, he needed to be somewhere else in the timeline at this point.)

Brandon Sanderson

"The one you have to watch for is the White Fox," Daggon said, sipping his beer. "They say he shook hands with the Evil itself, that he visited the Fallen World and came back with strange powers. He can kindle fire on even the deepest of nights, and no shade will dare come for his soul. Yes, the White Fox. Meanest bastard in these parts for sure. Pray he doesn't set his eyes on you, friend. If he does, you're dead."

Daggon's drinking companion had a neck like a slender wine bottle and a head like a potato stuck sideways on the top. He squeaked as he spoke, a Lastport accent, voice echoing in the eaves of the waystop's common room. "Why . . . why would he set his eyes on me?"

"That depends, friend," Daggon said, looking about as a few overdressed merchants sauntered in. They wore black coats, ruffled lace poking out the front, and the tall-topped, wide-brimmed hats of fortfolk. They wouldn't last two weeks out here in the Forests.

"It depends?" Daggon's dining companion prompted. "It depends on what?"

"On a lot of things, friend. The White Fox is a bounty hunter, you know. What crimes have you committed? What have you done?"

"Nothing." That squeak was like a rusty wheel.

"Nothing? Men don't come out into the Forests to do 'nothing,' friend."

His companion glanced from side to side. He'd given his name as Earnest. But then, Daggon had given his name as Amity. Names didn't mean a whole lot in the Forests. Or maybe they meant everything. The right ones, that was.

Earnest leaned back, scrunching down that fishing-pole neck of his as if trying to disappear into his beer. He'd bite. People liked hearing about the White Fox, and Daggon considered himself an expert. At least, he was an expert at telling stories to get ratty men like Earnest to pay for his drinks.

I'll give him some time to stew, Daggon thought, smiling to himself. *Let him worry.* Earnest would ply him for more information in a bit.

While he waited, Daggon leaned back, surveying the room. The merchants were making a nuisance of themselves, calling for food, saying they meant to be on their way in an hour. That *proved* them to be fools. Traveling at night in the Forests? Good homesteader stock would do it. Men like these, though . . . they'd probably take less than an hour to violate one of the Simple Rules and bring the shades upon them. Daggon put the idiots out of his mind.

That fellow in the corner, though . . . dressed all in brown, still

wearing his hat despite being indoors. That fellow looked truly dangerous. *I wonder if it's him,* Daggon thought. So far as he knew, nobody had ever seen the White Fox and lived. Ten years, over a hundred bounties turned in. Surely someone knew his name. The authorities in the forts paid him the bounties, after all.

The waystop's owner, Madam Silence, passed by the table and deposited Daggon's meal with an unceremonious thump. Scowling, she topped off his beer, spilling a sudsy dribble onto his hand, before limping off. She was a stout woman. Tough. Everyone in the Forests was tough. The ones that survived, at least.

He'd learned that a scowl from Silence was just her way of saying hello. She'd given him an extra helping of venison; she often did that. He liked to think that she had a fondness for him. Maybe someday . . .

Don't be a fool, he thought to himself as he dug into the heavily gravied food and took a few gulps of his beer. Better to marry a stone than Silence Montane. A stone showed more affection. Likely she gave him the extra slice because she recognized the value of a repeat customer. Fewer and fewer people came this way lately. Too many shades. And then there was Chesterton. Nasty business, that.

"So . . . he's a bounty hunter, this Fox?" The man who called himself Earnest seemed to be sweating.

Daggon smiled. Hooked right good, this one was. "He's not just a bounty hunter. He's *the* bounty hunter. Though the White Fox doesn't go for the small-timers—and no offense, friend, but you seem pretty small-time."

His friend grew more nervous. What *had* he done? "But," the man stammered, "he wouldn't come for me—er, pretending I'd done something, of course—anyway, he wouldn't come in here, would he? I mean, Madam Silence's waystop, it's protected. Everyone knows that. Shade of her dead husband lurks here. I had a cousin who saw it, I did."

"The White Fox doesn't fear shades," Daggon said, leaning in. "Now, mind you, I don't *think* he'd risk coming in here—but not because of some shade. Everyone knows this is neutral ground. You've got to have some safe places, even in the Forests. But . . ."

Daggon smiled at Silence as she passed him by, on the way to the kitchens again. This time she didn't scowl at him. He was getting through to her for certain.

"But?" Earnest squeaked.

"Well . . ." Daggon said. "I could tell you a few things about how the White Fox takes men, but you see, my beer is nearly empty. A shame. I think you'd be very interested in how the White Fox caught Makepeace Hapshire. Great story, that."

Earnest squeaked for Silence to bring another beer, though she

bustled into the kitchen and didn't hear. Daggon frowned, but Earnest put a coin on the side of the table, indicating he'd like a refill when Silence or her daughter returned. That would do. Daggon smiled to himself and launched into the story.

Silence Montane closed the door to the common room, then turned and pressed her back against it. She tried to still her racing heart by breathing in and out. Had she made any obvious signs? Did they know she'd recognized them?

William Ann passed by, wiping her hands on a cloth. "Mother?" the young woman asked, pausing. "Mother, are you—"

"Fetch the book. Quickly, child!"

William Ann's face went pale, then she hurried into the back pantry. Silence clutched her apron to still her nerves, then joined William Ann as the girl came out of the pantry with a thick, leather satchel. White flour dusted its cover and spine from the hiding place.

Silence took the satchel and opened it on the high kitchen counter, revealing a collection of loose-leaf papers. Most had faces drawn on them. As Silence rifled through the pages, William Ann moved to the peephole for spying into the common room.

For a few moments, the only sound to accompany Silence's thumping heart was that of hastily turned pages.

"It's the man with the long neck, isn't it?" William Ann asked. "I remember his face from one of the bounties."

"That's just Lamentation Winebare, a petty horse thief. He's barely worth two measures of silver."

"Who, then? The man in the back, with the hat?"

Silence shook her head, finding a sequence of pages at the bottom of her pile. She inspected the drawings. *God Beyond,* she thought. *I can't decide if I want it to be them or not.* At least her hands had stopped shaking.

William Ann scurried back and craned her neck over Silence's shoulder. At fourteen, the girl was already taller than her mother. A fine thing to suffer, a child taller than you. Though William Ann grumbled about being awkward and lanky, her slender build foreshadowed a beauty to come. She took after her father.

"Oh, God *Beyond,*" William Ann said, raising a hand to her mouth. "You mean—"

"Chesterton Divide," Silence said. The shape of the chin, the look in the eyes . . . they were the same. "He walked right into our hands, with four of his men." The bounty on those five would be enough to pay her supply needs for a year. Maybe two.

Her eyes flickered to the words below the pictures, printed in harsh, bold letters. **Extremely dangerous. Wanted for murder, rape, extortion.** And, of course, there was the big one at the end: **And assassination.**

Silence had always wondered if Chesterton and his men had intended to kill the governor of the most powerful fort city on this continent, or if it had been an accident. A simple robbery gone wrong. Either way, Chesterton understood what he'd done. Before the incident, he had been a common—if accomplished—highway bandit.

Now he was something greater, something far more dangerous. Chesterton knew that if he were captured, there would be no mercy, no quarter. Lastport had painted Chesterton as an anarchist, a menace, and a psychopath.

Chesterton had no reason to hold back. So he didn't.

Oh, God Beyond, Silence thought, looking at the continuing list of his crimes on the next page.

Beside her, William Ann whispered the words to herself. "He's out there?" she asked. "But where?"

"The merchants," Silence said.

"*What?*" William Ann rushed back to the peephole. The wood there—indeed, all around the kitchen—had been scrubbed so hard that it had been bleached white. Sebruki had been cleaning again.

"I can't see it," William Ann said.

"Look closer." Silence hadn't seen it at first either, even though she spent each night with the book, memorizing its faces.

A few moments later William Ann gasped, raising her hand to her mouth. "That seems so *foolish* of him. Why is he going about perfectly visible like this? Even in disguise."

"Everyone will remember just another band of fool merchants from the fort who thought they could brave the Forests. It's a clever ruse. When they vanish from the paths in a few days, it will be assumed—if anyone cares to wonder—that the shades got them. Besides, this way Chesterton can travel quickly and in the open, visiting waystops and listening for information."

Was this how Chesterton discovered good targets to hit? Had they come through her waystop before? The thought made her stomach turn. She had fed criminals many times; some were regulars. Every man was probably a criminal out in the Forests, if only for ignoring taxes imposed by the fortfolk.

Chesterton and his men were different. She didn't need the list of crimes to know what they were capable of doing.

"Where's Sebruki?" Silence said.

William Ann shook herself, as if coming out of a stupor. "She's feeding the pigs. Shadows! You don't think they'd recognize her, do you?"

"No," Silence said. "I'm worried she'll recognize them." Sebruki might only be eight, but she could be shockingly—disturbingly—observant.

Silence closed the book of bounties. She rested her fingers on the satchel's leather.

"We're going to kill them, aren't we?" William Ann asked.

"Yes."

"How much are they worth?"

"Sometimes, child, it's not about what a man is worth." Silence heard the faint lie in her voice. Times were increasingly tight, with the price of silver from both Bastion Hill and Lastport on the rise.

Sometimes it wasn't about what a man was worth. But this wasn't one of those times.

"I'll get the poison." William Ann left the peephole and crossed the room.

"Something light, child," Silence cautioned. "These are dangerous men. They'll notice if things are out of the ordinary."

"I'm not a fool, Mother," William Ann said dryly. "I'll use fenweed. They won't taste it in the beer."

"Half dose. I don't want them collapsing at the table."

William Ann nodded, entering the old storage room, where she closed the door and began prying up floorboards to get to the poisons. Fenweed would leave the men cloudy-headed and dizzy, but wouldn't kill them.

Silence didn't dare risk something more deadly. If suspicion ever came back to her waystop, her career—and likely her life—would end. She needed to remain, in the minds of travelers, the crotchety but fair innkeeper who didn't ask too many questions. Her waystop was a place of perceived safety, even for the roughest of criminals. She bedded down each night with a heart full of fear that someone would realize a suspicious number of the White Fox's bounties stayed at Silence's waystop in the days preceding their demise.

She went into the pantry to put away the bounty book. Here, too, the walls had been scrubbed clean, the shelves freshly sanded and dusted. That child. Who had heard of a child who would rather clean than play? Of course, given what Sebruki had been through . . .

Silence could not help reaching onto the top shelf and feeling the crossbow she kept there. Silver boltheads. She kept it for shades, and hadn't yet turned it against a man. Drawing blood was too dangerous in the Forests. It still comforted her to know that in case of a true emergency, she had the weapon at hand.

Bounty book stowed, she went to check on Sebruki. The child was indeed caring for the pigs. Silence liked to keep a healthy stock, though of course not for eating. Pigs were said to ward away shades. She used any tool she could to make the waystop seem more safe.

Sebruki knelt inside the pig shack. The short girl had dark skin and long, black hair. Nobody would have taken her for Silence's daughter,

even if they hadn't heard of Sebruki's unfortunate history. The child hummed to herself, scrubbing at the wall of the enclosure.

"Child?" Silence asked.

Sebruki turned to her and smiled. What a difference one year could make. Once, Silence would have sworn that this child would never smile again. Sebruki had spent her first three months at the waystop staring at walls. No matter where Silence had put her, the child had moved to the nearest wall, sat down, and stared at it all day. Never speaking a word. Eyes dead as those of a shade . . .

"Aunt Silence?" Sebruki asked. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine, child. Just plagued by memories. You're . . . cleaning the *pig shack* now?"

"The walls need a good scrubbing," Sebruki said. "The pigs do so like it to be clean. Well, Jarom and Ezekiel prefer it that way. The others don't seem to care."

"You don't need to clean so hard, child."

"I like doing it," Sebruki said. "It feels good. It's something I can do. To help."

Well, it was better to clean the walls than stare blankly at them all day. Today, Silence was happy for anything that kept the child busy. Anything, so long as she didn't enter the common room.

"I think the pigs will like it," Silence said. "Why don't you keep at it in here for a while?"

Sebruki eyed her. "What's wrong?"

Shadows. She was so observant. "There are some men with rough tongues in the common room," Silence said. "I won't have you picking up their cussing."

"I'm not a child, Aunt Silence."

"Yes you are," Silence said firmly. "And you'll obey. Don't think I won't take a switch to your backside."

Sebruki rolled her eyes, but went back to work and began humming to herself. Silence let a little of her grandmother's ways out when she spoke with Sebruki. The child responded well to sternness. She seemed to crave it, perhaps as a symbol that someone was in control.

Silence wished she actually were in control. But she was a Forescout —the surname taken by her grandparents and the others who had left Homeland first and explored this continent. Yes, she was a Forescout, and she'd be damned before she'd let anyone know how absolutely powerless she felt much of the time.

Silence crossed the backyard of the large inn, noting William Ann inside the kitchen mixing a paste to dissolve in the beer. Silence passed her by and looked in on the stable. Unsurprisingly, Chesterton had said they'd be leaving after their meal. While a lot of folk sought the relative safety of a waystop at night, Chesterton and his men

would be accustomed to sleeping in the Forests. Even with the shades about, they would feel more comfortable in a camp of their own devising than they would in a waystop bed.

Inside the stable, Dob—the old stable hand—had just finished brushing down the horses. He wouldn't have watered them. Silence had a standing order to not do that until last.

"This is well done, Dob," Silence said. "Why don't you take your break now?"

He nodded to her with a mumbled, "Thank'ya, mam." He'd find the front porch and his pipe, as always. Dob hadn't two wits to rub together, and he hadn't a clue about what she really did at the waystop, but he'd been with her since before William's death. He was as loyal a man as she'd ever found.

Silence shut the door after him, then fetched some pouches from the locked cabinet at the rear of the stable. She checked each one in the dim light, then set them on the grooming table and heaved the first saddle onto its owner's back.

She was near finished with the saddling when the door eased open. She froze, immediately thinking of the pouches on the table. Why hadn't she stuffed them in her apron? Sloppy!

"Silence Forescout," a smooth voice said from the doorway.

Silence stifled a groan and turned to confront her visitor. "Theopolis," she said. "It's not polite to sneak about on a woman's property. I should have you thrown out for trespassing."

"Now, now. That would be rather like . . . the horse kicking at the man who feeds him, hmmm?" Theopolis leaned his gangly frame against the doorway, folding his arms. He wore simple clothing, no markings of his station. A fort tax collector often didn't want random passers to know of his profession. Clean-shaven, his face always had that same patronizing smile on it. His clothing was too clean, too new to be that of one who lived out in the Forests. Not that he was a dandy, nor was he a fool. Theopolis was dangerous, just a different kind of dangerous from most.

"Why are you here, Theopolis?" she said, hefting the last saddle onto the back of a snorting roan gelding.

"Why do I always come to you, Silence? It's not because of your cheerful countenance, hmmm?"

"I'm paid up on taxes."

"That's because you're mostly exempt from taxes," Theopolis said. "But you haven't paid me for last month's shipment of silver."

"Things have been a little dry lately. It's coming."

"And the bolts for your crossbow?" Theopolis asked. "One wonders if you're trying to forget about the price of those silver boltheads, hmmm? And the shipment of replacement sections for your protection

rings?"

His whining accent made her wince as she buckled the saddle on. Theopolis. Shadows, what a day!

"Oh my," Theopolis said, walking over to the grooming table. He picked up one of the pouches. "What are these, now? That looks like wetleek sap. I've heard that it glows at night if you shine the right kind of light upon it. Is this one of the White Fox's mysterious secrets?"

She snatched the pouch away. "Don't say that name," she hissed.

He grinned. "You have a bounty! Delightful. I have always wondered how you tracked them. Poke a pinhole in that, attach it to the underside of the saddle, then follow the dripping trail it leaves? Hmmm? You could probably track them a long way, kill them far from here. Keep suspicion off the little waystop?"

Yes, Theopolis was dangerous, but she needed *someone* to turn in her bounties for her. Theopolis was a rat, and like all rats he knew the best holes, troughs, and crannies. He had connections in Lastport, and had managed to get her the money in the name of the White Fox without revealing her.

"I've been tempted to turn you in lately, you know," Theopolis said. "Many a group keeps a betting pool on the identity of the infamous Fox. I could be a rich man with this knowledge, hmmm?"

"You're already a rich man," she snapped. "And though you're many things, you are not an idiot. This has worked just fine for a decade. Don't tell me you'd trade wealth for a little notoriety?"

He smiled, but did not contradict her. He kept half of what she earned from each bounty. It was a fine arrangement for Theopolis. No danger to him, which was how she knew he liked it. He was a civil servant, not a bounty hunter. The only time she'd seen him kill, the man he'd murdered couldn't fight back.

"You know me too well, Silence," Theopolis said with a laugh. "Too well indeed. My, my. A bounty! I wonder who it is. I'll have to go look in the common room."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. Shadows! You think the face of a tax collector won't spook them? Don't you go walking in and spoiling things."

"Peace, Silence," he said, still grinning. "I obey your rules. I am careful not to show myself around here often, and I don't bring suspicion to you. I couldn't stay today anyway; I merely came to give you an offer. Only now you probably won't need it! Ah, such a pity. After all the trouble I went to in your name, hmmm?"

She felt cold. "What help could you possibly give me?"

He took a sheet of paper from his satchel, then carefully unfolded it with too-long fingers. He moved to hold it up, but she snatched it

from him.

"What is this?"

"A way to relieve you of your debt, Silence! A way to prevent you from ever having to worry again."

The paper was a writ of seizure, an authorization for Silence's creditors—Theopolis—to claim her property as payment. The forts claimed jurisdiction over the roadways and the land to either side of them. They did send soldiers out to patrol them. Occasionally.

"I take it back, Theopolis," she spat. "You most certainly *are* a fool. You'd give up everything we have for a greedy land snatch?"

"Of course not, Silence. This wouldn't be giving up anything at all! Why, I *do* so feel bad seeing you constantly in my debt. Wouldn't it be more efficient if I took over the finances of the waystop? You would remain working here, and hunting bounties, as you always have. Only, you would no longer have to worry about your debts, hmmm?"

She crumpled the paper in her hand. "You'd turn me and mine into slaves, Theopolis."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. Those in Lastport have begun to worry that such an important waypoint as this is owned by an unknown element. You are drawing attention, Silence. I should think that is the last thing you want."

Silence crumpled the paper further in her hand, fist tight. Horses shuffled in their stalls. Theopolis grinned.

"Well," he said. "Perhaps it won't be needed. Perhaps this bounty of yours is a big one, hmmm? Any clues to give me, so I don't sit wondering all day?"

"Get out," she whispered.

"Dear Silence," he said. "Forescout blood, stubborn to the last breath. They say your grandparents were the first of the first. The first people to come scout this continent, the first to homestead the Forests . . . the first to stake a claim on hell itself."

"Don't call the Forests that. This is my home."

"But it is how men saw this land, before the Evil. Doesn't that make you curious? Hell, land of the damned, where the shadows of the dead made their home. I keep wondering: Is there really a shade of your departed husband guarding this place, or is it just another story you tell people? To make them feel safe, hmmm? You spend a fortune in silver. That offers the real protection, and I never *have* been able to find a record of your marriage. Of course, if there wasn't one, that would make dear William Ann a—"

"*Go.*"

He grinned, but tipped his hat to her and stepped out. She heard him climb into the saddle, then ride off. Night would soon fall; it was probably too much to hope that the shades would take Theopolis.

She'd long suspected that he had a hiding hole somewhere near, probably a cavern he kept lined with silver.

She breathed in and out, trying to calm herself. Theopolis was frustrating, but he didn't know everything. She forced her attention back to the horses and got out a bucket of water. She dumped the contents of the pouches into it, then gave a hearty dose to the horses, who each drank thirstily.

Pouches that dripped sap in the way Theopolis indicated would be too easy to spot. What would happen when her bounties removed their saddles at night and found the pouches? They'd know someone was coming for them. No, she needed something less obvious.

"How am I going to manage this?" she whispered as a horse drank from her bucket. "Shadows. They're reaching for me on all sides."

Kill Theopolis. That was probably what Grandmother would have done. She considered it.

No, she thought. *I won't become that. I won't become her.* Theopolis was a thug and a scoundrel, but he had not broken any laws, nor had he done anyone direct harm that she knew. There had to be rules, even out here. There had to be lines. Perhaps in that respect, she wasn't so different from the fortfolk.

She'd find another way. Theopolis only had a writ of debt; he had been required to show it to her. That meant she had a day or two to come up with his money. All neat and orderly. In the fort cities, they claimed to have civilization. Those rules gave her a chance.

She left the stable. A glance through the window into the common room showed her William Ann delivering drinks to the "merchants" of Chesterton's gang. Silence stopped to watch.

Behind her, the Forests shivered in the wind.

Silence listened, then turned to face them. You could tell fortfolk by the way they refused to face the Forests. They averted their eyes, never looking into the depths. Those solemn trees covered almost every inch of this continent, those leaves shading the ground. Still. Silent. Animals lived out there, but fort surveyors declared that there were no predators. The shades had gotten those long ago, drawn by the shedding of blood.

Staring into the Forests seemed to make them . . . retreat. The darkness of their depths withdrew, the stillness gave way to the sound of rodents picking through fallen leaves. A Forescout knew to look the Forests straight on. A Forescout knew that the surveyors were wrong. There *was* a predator out there. The Forest itself was one.

Silence turned and walked to the door into the kitchen. Keeping the waystop had to be her first goal, so she was committed to collecting Chesterton's bounty now. If she couldn't pay Theopolis, she had little faith that everything would stay the same. He'd have a hand around

her throat, as she couldn't leave the waystop. She had no fort citizenship, and times were too tight for the local homesteaders to take her in. No, she'd *have* to stay and work the waystop for Theopolis, and he would squeeze her dry, taking larger and larger percentages of the bounties.

She pushed open the door to the kitchen. It—

Sebruki sat at the kitchen table holding the crossbow in her lap.

"God Beyond!" Silence gasped, pulling the door closed as she stepped inside. "Child, what are you—"

Sebruki looked up at her. Those haunted eyes were back, eyes void of life and emotion. Eyes like a shade's.

"We have visitors, Aunt Silence," Sebruki said in a cold, monotone voice. The crossbow's winding crank sat next to her. She had managed to load the thing and cock it, all on her own. "I coated the bolt's tip with blackblood. I did that right, didn't I? That way, the poison will kill him for sure."

"Child . . ." Silence stepped forward.

Sebruki turned the crossbow in her lap, holding it at an angle to support it, one small hand on the trigger. The point turned toward Silence.

Sebruki stared ahead, eyes blank.

"This won't work, Sebruki," Silence said, stern. "Even if you were able to lift that thing into the common room, you wouldn't hit him—and even if you did, his men would kill us all in retribution!"

"I wouldn't mind," Sebruki said softly. "So long as I got to kill him. So long as I pulled the trigger."

"You care nothing for us?" Silence snapped. "I take you in, give you a home, and this is your payment? You steal a weapon? You *threaten* me?"

Sebruki blinked.

"What is wrong with you?" Silence said. "You'd shed blood in this place of sanctuary? Bring the shades down upon us, beating at our protections? If they got through, they'd kill everyone under my roof! People I've promised safety. How *dare* you!"

Sebruki shook, as if coming awake. Her mask broke and she dropped the crossbow. Silence heard a snap, and the catch released. She felt the bolt pass within an inch of her cheek, then break the window behind.

Shadows! Had the bolt grazed Silence? Had Sebruki *drawn blood*? Silence reached up with a shaking hand, but blessedly felt no blood. The bolt hadn't hit her.

A moment later Sebruki was in her arms, sobbing. Silence knelt down, holding the child close. "Hush, dear one. It's all right. It's all right."

“I heard it all,” Sebruki whispered. “Mother never cried out. She knew I was there. She was strong, Aunt Silence. That was why I could be strong, even when the blood came down. Soaking my hair. I heard it. *I heard it all.*”

Silence closed her eyes, holding Sebruki tight. She herself had been the only one willing to investigate the smoking homestead. Sebruki’s father had stayed at the waystop on occasion. A good man. As good a man as was left after the Evil took Homeland, that was.

In the smoldering remains of the homestead, Silence had found the corpses of a dozen people. Each family member had been slaughtered by Chesterton and his men, right down to the children. The only one left had been Sebruki, the youngest, who had been shoved into the crawl space under the floorboards in the bedroom.

She’d lain there, soaked in her mother’s blood, soundless even as Silence found her. She’d only discovered the girl because Chesterton had been careful, lining the room with silver dust to protect against shades as he prepared to kill. Silence had tried to recover some of the dust that had trickled between the floorboards, and had run across eyes staring up at her through the slits.

Chesterton had burned thirteen different homesteads over the last year. Over fifty people murdered. Sebruki was the only one who had escaped him.

The girl trembled as she heaved with sobs. “Why . . . Why?”

“There is no reason. I’m sorry.” What else could she do? Offer some foolish platitude or comfort about the God Beyond? These were the Forests. You didn’t survive on platitudes.

Silence did hold the girl until her crying began to subside. William Ann entered, then stilled beside the kitchen table, holding a tray of empty mugs. Her eyes flickered toward the fallen crossbow, then at the broken window.

“You’ll kill him?” Sebruki whispered. “You’ll bring him to justice?”

“Justice died in Homeland,” Silence said. “But yes, I’ll kill him. I promise it to you, child.”

Stepping timidly, William Ann picked up the crossbow, then turned it, displaying its now broken bow. Silence breathed out. She should never have left the thing where Sebruki could get to it.

“Care for the patrons, William Ann,” Silence said. “I’ll take Sebruki upstairs.”

William Ann nodded, glancing at the broken window.

“No blood was shed,” Silence said. “We will be fine. Though if you get a moment, see if you can find the bolt. The head is silver.” This was hardly a time when they could afford to waste money.

William Ann stowed the crossbow in the pantry as Silence carefully set Sebruki on a kitchen stool. The girl clung to her, refusing to let go,

so Silence relented and held her for a time longer.

William Ann took a few deep breaths, as if to calm herself, then pushed back out into the common room to distribute drinks.

Eventually, Sebruki let go long enough for Silence to mix a draught. She carried the girl up the stairs to the loft above the common room, where the three of them made their beds. Dob slept in the stable and the guests in the nicer rooms on the second floor.

"You're going to make me sleep," Sebruki said, regarding the cup with reddened eyes.

"The world will seem a brighter place in the morning," Silence said. *And I can't risk you sneaking out after me tonight.*

The girl reluctantly took the draught, then drank it down. "I'm sorry. About the crossbow."

"We will find a way for you to work off the cost of fixing it."

That seemed to comfort Sebruki. She was a homesteader, Forests born. "You used to sing to me at night," Sebruki said softly, closing her eyes, lying back. "When you first brought me here. After . . . After . . ." She swallowed.

"I wasn't certain you noticed." Silence hadn't been certain Sebruki noticed anything, during those times.

"I did."

Silence sat down on the stool beside Sebruki's cot. She didn't feel like singing, so she began humming. It was the lullaby she'd sung to William Ann during the hard times right after her birth.

Before long, the words came out, unbidden:

"Hush now, my dear one . . . be not afraid. Night comes upon us, but sunlight will break. Sleep now, my dear one . . . let your tears fade. Darkness surrounds us, but someday we'll wake. . . ."

She held Sebruki's hand until the child fell asleep. The window by the bed overlooked the courtyard, so Silence could see as Dob brought out Chesterton's horses. The five men in their fancy merchant clothing stomped down off the porch and climbed into their saddles.

They rode in a file out onto the roadway; then the Forests enveloped them.

One hour after nightfall, Silence packed her rucksack by the light of the hearth.

Her grandmother had kindled that hearth's flame, and it had been burning ever since. She'd nearly lost her life lighting the fire, but she hadn't been willing to pay any of the fire merchants for a start. Silence shook her head. Grandmother always had bucked convention. But then, was Silence any better?

Don't kindle flame, don't shed the blood of another, don't run at night. These things draw shades. The Simple Rules, by which every homesteader lived. She'd broken all three on more than one occasion. It was a wonder she hadn't been withered away into a shade by now.

The fire's warmth seemed a distant thing as she prepared to kill. Silence glanced at the old shrine, really just a closet, that she kept locked. The flames reminded her of her grandmother. At times, she thought of the fire *as* her grandmother. Defiant of both the shades and the forts, right until the end. She'd purged the waystop of other reminders of Grandmother, all save the shrine to the God Beyond. That was set behind a locked door beside the pantry, and next to the door had once hung her grandmother's silver dagger, symbol of the old religion.

That dagger was etched with the symbols of divinity as a warding. Silence now carried it in a sheath at her side, not for its wardings, but because it was silver. One could never have too much silver in the Forests.

She packed the sack carefully, first putting in her medicine kit and then a good-sized pouch of silver dust to heal withering. She followed that with ten empty sacks of thick burlap, tarred on the inside to prevent their contents from leaking. Finally, she added an oil lamp. She wouldn't want to use it, as she didn't trust fire. Fire could draw shades. However, she'd found it useful to have on prior outings, so she brought it. She'd only light it if she ran across someone who already had a fire started.

Once done, she hesitated, then went to the old storage room. She removed the floorboards and took out the small, dry-packed keg that lay beside the poisons.

Gunpowder.

"Mother?" William Ann asked, causing her to jump. She hadn't heard the girl enter the kitchen.

Silence nearly dropped the keg in her startlement, and that nearly stopped her heart. She cursed herself for a fool, tucking the keg under her arm. It couldn't explode without fire. She knew that much.

“Mother!” William Ann said, looking at the keg.

“I probably won’t need it.”

“But—”

“I know. Hush.” She walked over and placed the keg into her sack. Attached to the side of the keg, with cloth stuffed between the metal arms, was her grandmother’s firestarter. Igniting gunpowder counted as kindling flames, at least in the eyes of the shades. It drew them almost as quickly as blood did, day or night. The early refugees from Homeland had discovered that in short order.

In some ways, blood was easier to avoid. A simple nosebleed or issue of blood wouldn’t draw the shades; they wouldn’t even notice. It had to be the blood of another, shed by your hands—and they would go for the one who shed the blood first. Of course, after that person was dead, they often didn’t care who they killed next. Once enraged, shades were dangerous to all nearby.

Only after Silence had the gunpowder packed did she notice that William Ann was dressed for traveling in trousers and boots. She carried a sack like Silence’s.

“What do you think you’re about, William Ann?” Silence asked.

“You intend to kill five men who had only half a dose of fenweed by yourself, Mother?”

“I’ve done similar before. I’ve learned to work on my own.”

“Only because you didn’t have anyone else to help.” William Ann slung her sack onto her shoulder. “That’s no longer the case.”

“You’re too young. Go back to bed; watch the waystop until I return.”

William Ann showed no signs of budging.

“Child, I told you—”

“Mother,” William Ann said, taking her arm firmly, “you aren’t a *youth* anymore! You think I don’t see your limp getting worse? You can’t do everything by yourself! You’re going to have to start letting me help you sometime, dammit!”

Silence regarded her daughter. Where had that fierceness come from? It was hard to remember that William Ann, too, was Forescout stock. Grandmother would have been disgusted by her, and that made Silence proud. William Ann had actually had a childhood. She wasn’t weak, she was just . . . normal. A woman could be strong without having the emotions of a brick.

“Don’t you cuss at your mother,” Silence finally told the girl.

William Ann raised an eyebrow.

“You may come,” Silence said, prying her arm out of her daughter’s grip. “But you *will* do as you are told.”

William Ann let out a deep breath, then nodded eagerly. “I’ll warn Dob we’re going.” She walked out, adopting the natural slow step of a

homesteader as she entered the darkness. Even though she was within the protection of the waystop's silver rings, she knew to follow the Simple Rules. Ignoring them when you were safe led to lapses when you weren't.

Silence got out two bowls, then mixed two different types of glowpaste. When finished, she poured them into separate jars, which she packed into her sack.

She stepped outside into the night. The air was crisp, chill. The Forests had gone silent.

The shades were out, of course.

A few of them moved across the grassy ground, visible by their own soft glow. Ethereal, translucent, the ones nearby right now were old shades; they barely had human forms any longer. The heads rippled, faces shifting like smoke rings. They trailed waves of whiteness about an arm's length behind them. Silence had always imagined that as the tattered remains of their clothing.

No woman, not even a Forescout, looked upon shades without feeling a coldness inside of her. The shades were about during the day, of course; you just couldn't see them. Kindle fire, draw blood, and they'd come for you even then. At night, though, they were different. Quicker to respond to infractions. At night they also responded to rapid motions, which they never did during the day.

Silence took out one of the glowpaste jars, bathing the area around her in a pale green light. The light was dim, but was even and steady, unlike torchlight. Torches were unreliable, since you couldn't relight them if they went out.

William Ann waited at the front with the lantern poles. "We will need to move quietly," Silence told her while affixing the jars to the poles. "You may speak, but do so in a whisper. I said you will obey me. You will, in all things, immediately. These men we're after . . . they will kill you, or worse, without giving the deed a passing thought."

William Ann nodded.

"You're not scared enough," Silence said, slipping a black covering around the jar with the brighter glowpaste. That plunged them into darkness, but the Starbelt was high in the sky today. Some of that light would filter down through the leaves, particularly if they stayed near the road.

"I—" William Ann began.

"You remember when Harold's hound went mad last spring?" Silence asked. "Do you remember that look in the hound's eyes? No recognition? Eyes that lusted for the kill? Well, that's what these men are, William Ann. Rabid. They need to be put down, same as that hound. They won't see you as a person. They'll see you as meat. Do

you understand?"

William Ann nodded. Silence could see that she was still more excited than afraid, but there was no helping that. Silence handed William Ann the pole with the darker glowpaste. It had a faint blue light to it but didn't illuminate much. Silence put the other pole to her right shoulder, sack over her left, then nodded toward the roadway.

Nearby, a shade drifted toward the boundary of the waystop. When it touched the thin barrier of silver on the ground, the silver crackled like sparks and drove the thing backward with a sudden jerk. The shade floated the other way.

Each touch like that cost Silence money. The touch of a shade ruined silver. That was what her patrons paid for: a waystop whose boundary had not been broken in over a hundred years, with a long-standing tradition that no unwanted shades were trapped within. Peace, of a sort. The best the Forests offered.

William Ann stepped across the boundary, which was marked by the curve of the large silver hoops jutting from the ground. They were anchored below by concrete so you couldn't just pull one up. Replacing an overlapping section from one of the rings—she had three concentric ones surrounding her waystop—required digging down and unchaining the section. It was a lot of work, which Silence knew intimately. A week didn't pass that they didn't rotate or replace one section or another.

The shade nearby drifted away. It didn't acknowledge them. Silence didn't know if regular people were invisible to them unless the rules were broken, or if the people just weren't worthy of attention until then.

She and William Ann moved out onto the dark roadway, which was somewhat overgrown. No road in the Forests was well maintained. Perhaps if the forts ever made good on their promises, that would change. Still, there was travel. Homesteaders traveling to one fort or another to trade food. The grains grown out in Forest clearings were richer, tastier than what could be produced up in the mountains. Rabbits and turkeys caught in snares or raised in hutches could be sold for good silver.

Not hogs. Only someone in one of the forts would be so crass as to eat a pig.

Anyway, there *was* trade, and that kept the roadway worn, even if the trees around did have a tendency to reach down their boughs—like grasping arms—to try to cover up the pathway. Reclaim it. The Forests did not like that people had infested them.

The two women walked carefully and deliberately. No quick motions. Walking so, it seemed an eternity before something appeared on the road in front of them.

"There!" William Ann whispered.

Silence released her tension in a breath. Something glowing blue marked the roadway in the light of the glowpaste. Theopolis's guess at how she tracked her quarries had been a good one, but incomplete. Yes, the light of the paste also known as Abraham's Fire did make drops of wetleek sap glow. By coincidence, wetleek sap *also* caused a horse's bladder to loosen.

Silence inspected the line of glowing sap and urine on the ground. She'd been worried that Chesterton and his men would set off into the Forests soon after leaving the waystop. That hadn't been likely, but still she'd worried.

Now she was sure she had the trail. If Chesterton cut into the Forests, he'd do it a few hours after leaving the waystop, to be more certain their cover was safe. She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, then found herself offering a prayer of thanks by rote. She hesitated. Where had that come from? It had been a long time.

She shook her head, rising and continuing down the road. By drugging all five horses, she got a steady sequence of markings to follow.

The Forests felt . . . dark this night. The light of the Starbelt above didn't seem to filter through the branches as well as it should. And there seemed to be more shades than normal, prowling between the trunks of trees, glowing just faintly.

William Ann clung to her lantern pole. The child had been out in the night before, of course. No homesteader looked forward to doing so, but none shied away from it either. You couldn't spend your life trapped inside, frozen by fear of the darkness. Live like that, and . . . well, you were no better off than the people in the forts. Life in the Forests was hard, often deadly. But it was also free.

"Mother," William Ann whispered as they walked. "Why don't you believe in God anymore?"

"Is this really the time, girl?"

William Ann looked down as they passed another line of urine, glowing blue on the roadway. "You always say something like that."

"And I'm usually trying to avoid the question when you ask it," Silence said. "But I'm also not usually walking the Forests at night."

"It just seems important to me now. You're wrong about me not being afraid enough. I can hardly breathe, but I do know how much trouble the waystop is in. You're always so angry after Master Theopolis visits. You don't change our border silver as often as you used to. One out of two days, you don't eat anything but bread."

"And you think this has to do with God . . . why?"

William Ann kept looking down.

Oh, shadows, Silence thought. *She thinks we're being punished.* Fool

girl. Foolish as her father.

They passed the Old Bridge, walking its rickety wooden planks. When the light was better, you could still pick out timbers from the New Bridge down in the chasm below, representing the promises of the forts and their gifts, which always looked pretty but frayed before long. Sebruki's father had been one of those who had come put the Old Bridge back up.

"I believe in the God Beyond," Silence said, after they reached the other side.

"But—"

"I don't worship," Silence said, "but that doesn't mean I don't believe. The old books, they called this land the home of the damned. I doubt that worshiping does any good if you're already damned. That's all."

William Ann didn't reply.

They walked another good two hours. Silence considered taking a shortcut through the woods, but the risk of losing the trail and having to double back felt too dangerous. Besides. Those markings, glowing a soft blue-white in the unseen light of the glowpaste . . . those were something *real*. A lifeline of light in the shadows all around. Those lines represented safety for her and her children.

With both of them counting the moments between urine markings, they didn't miss the turnoff by much. A few minutes walking without seeing a mark, and they turned back without a word, searching the sides of the path. Silence had worried this would be the most difficult part of the hunt, but they easily found where the men had turned into the Forests. A glowing hoofprint formed the sign; one of the horses had stepped in another's urine on the roadway, then tracked it into the Forests.

Silence set down her pack and opened it to retrieve her garrote, then held a finger to her lips and motioned for William Ann to wait by the road. The girl nodded. Silence couldn't make out much of her features in the darkness, but she did hear the girl's breathing grow more rapid. Being a homesteader and accustomed to going out at night was one thing. Being alone in the Forests . . .

Silence took the blue glowpaste jar and covered it with her handkerchief. Then she took off her shoes and stockings and crept out into the night. Each time she did this, she felt like a child again, going into the Forests with her grandfather. Toes in the dirt, testing for crackling leaves or twigs that would snap and give her away.

She could almost hear his voice giving instructions, telling her how to judge the wind and use the sound of rustling leaves to mask her as she crossed noisy patches. He'd loved the Forests until the day they'd claimed him. *Never call this land hell,* he had said. *Respect the land as*

you would a dangerous beast, but do not hate it.

Shades slid through the trees nearby, almost invisible with nothing to illuminate them. She kept her distance, but even so, she occasionally turned to see one of the things drifting past her. Stumbling into a shade could kill you, but that kind of accident was uncommon. Unless enraged, shades moved away from people who got too close, as if blown by a soft breeze. So long as you were moving slowly—and you *should* be—you would be all right.

She kept the handkerchief around the jar except when she wanted to check specifically for any markings. Glowpaste illuminated shades, and shades that glowed too brightly might give warning of her approach.

A groan sounded nearby. Silence froze, heart practically bursting from her chest. Shades made no sound; that had been a man. Tense, silent, she searched until she caught sight of him, well hidden in the hollow of a tree. He moved, massaging his temples. The headaches from William Ann's poison were upon him.

Silence considered, then crept around the back of the tree. She crouched down, then waited a painful five minutes for him to move. He reached up again, rustling the leaves.

Silence snapped forward and looped her garrote around his neck, then pulled tight. Strangling wasn't the best way to kill a man in the Forests. It was so slow.

The guard started to thrash, clawing at his throat. Shades nearby halted.

Silence pulled tighter. The guard, weakened by the poison, tried to kick at her with his legs. She shuffled backward, still holding tightly, watching those shades. They looked around like animals sniffing the air. A few of them started to dim, their own faint natural luminescence fading, their forms bleeding from white to black.

Not a good sign. Silence felt her heartbeat like thunder inside. *Die, damn you!*

The man finally stopped jerking, motions growing more lethargic. After he trembled one final time and fell still, Silence waited there for a painful eternity, holding her breath. Finally the shades nearby faded back to white, then drifted off in their meandering directions.

She unwound the garrote, breathing out in relief. After a moment to get her bearings, she left the corpse and crept back to William Ann.

The girl did her proud; she'd hidden herself so well that Silence didn't see her until she whispered, "Mother?"

"Yes," Silence said.

"Thank the God Beyond," William Ann said, crawling out of the hollow where she'd covered herself in leaves. She took Silence by the arm, trembling. "You found them?"

“Killed the man on watch,” Silence said with a nod. “The other four should be sleeping. This is where I’ll need you.”

“I’m ready.”

“Follow.”

They moved back along the path Silence had taken. They passed the heap of the lookout’s corpse, and William Ann inspected it, showing no pity. “It’s one of them,” she whispered. “I recognize him.”

“Of course it’s one of them.”

“I just wanted to be sure. Since we’re . . . you know.”

Not far beyond the guard post, they found the camp. Four men in bedrolls slept amid the shades as only true Forestborn would ever try. They had set a small jar of glowpaste at the center of the camp, inside a pit so it wouldn’t glow too brightly and give them away, but it was enough light to show the horses tethered a few feet away on the other side of the camp. The green light also showed William Ann’s face, and Silence was shocked to see not fear but intense anger in the girl’s expression. She had taken quickly to being a protective older sister to Sebruki. She was ready to kill after all.

Silence gestured toward the rightmost man, and William Ann nodded. This was the dangerous part. On only a half dose, any of these men could still wake to the noise of their partners dying.

Silence took one of the burlap sacks from her pack and handed it to William Ann, then removed her hammer. It wasn’t some war weapon, like her grandfather had spoken of. Just a simple tool for pounding nails. Or other things.

Silence stooped over the first man. Seeing his sleeping face sent a shiver through her. A primal piece of her waited, tense, for those eyes to snap open.

She held up three fingers to William Ann, then lowered them one at a time. When the third finger went down, William Ann shoved the sack over the man’s head. As he jerked, Silence pounded him hard on the side of the temple with the hammer. The skull cracked and the head sank in a little. The man thrashed once, then grew limp.

Silence looked up, tense, watching the other men as William Ann pulled the sack tight. The shades nearby paused, but this didn’t draw their attention as much as the strangling had. So long as the sack’s lining of tar kept the blood from leaking out, they should be safe. Silence hit the man’s head twice more, then checked for a pulse. There was none.

They carefully did the next man in the row. It was brutal work, like slaughtering animals. It helped to think of these men as rabid, as she’d told William Ann earlier. It did not help to think of what the men had done to Sebruki. That would make her angry, and she couldn’t afford to be angry. She needed to be cold, quiet, and efficient.

The second man took a few more knocks to the head to kill, but he woke more slowly than his friend. Fenweed made men groggy. It was an excellent drug for her purposes. She just needed them sleepy, a little disoriented. And—

The next man sat up in his bedroll. "What . . . ?" he asked in a slurred voice.

Silence leaped for him, grabbing him by the shoulders and slamming him to the ground. Nearby shades spun about as if at a loud noise. Silence pulled her garrote out as the man heaved at her, trying to push her aside, and William Ann gasped in shock.

Silence rolled around, wrapping the man's neck. She pulled tight, straining while the man thrashed, agitating the shades. She almost had him dead when the last man leaped from his bedroll. In his dazed alarm, he chose to dash away.

Shadows! That last one was Chesterton himself. If he drew the shades . . .

Silence left the third man gasping and threw caution aside, racing after Chesterton. If the shades withered him to dust, she'd have *nothing*. No corpse to turn in meant no bounty.

The shades around the campsite faded from view as Silence reached Chesterton, catching him at the perimeter of the camp by the horses. She desperately tackled him by the legs, throwing the groggy man to the ground.

"You bitch," he said in a slurred voice, kicking at her. "You're the innkeeper. You poisoned me, you *bitch*!"

In the forest, the shades had gone completely black. Green eyes burst alight as they opened their earthsight. The eyes trailed a misty light.

Silence battered aside Chesterton's hands as he struggled.

"I'll pay you," he said, clawing at her. "I'll pay you—"

Silence slammed her hammer into his arm, causing him to scream. Then she brought it down on his face with a crunch. She ripped off her sweater as he groaned and thrashed, somehow wrapping it around his head and the hammer.

"William Ann!" she screamed. "I need a bag. A bag, girl! Give me—"

William Ann knelt beside her, pulling a sack over Chesterton's head as the blood soaked through the sweater. Silence reached to the side with a frantic hand and grabbed a stone, then smashed it into the sack-covered head. The sweater muffled Chesterton's screams, but also muffled the rock. She had to beat again and again.

He finally fell still. William Ann held the sack against his neck to keep the blood from flowing out, her breath coming in quick gasps. "Oh, God Beyond. Oh, *God* . . ."

Silence dared look up. Dozens of green eyes hung in the forest,

glowing like little fires in the blackness. William Ann squeezed her eyes shut and whispered a prayer, tears leaking down her cheeks.

Silence reached slowly to her side and took out her silver dagger. She remembered another night, another sea of glowing green eyes. Her grandmother's last night. *Run, girl! RUN!*

That night, running had been an option. They'd been close to safety. Even then, Grandmother hadn't made it. She might have, but she hadn't.

That night horrified Silence. What Grandmother had done. What Silence had done . . . Well, tonight she had only one hope. Running would not save them. Safety was too far away.

Slowly, blessedly, the eyes started to fade away. Silence sat back and let the silver knife slip out of her fingers to the ground.

William Ann opened her eyes. "Oh, God Beyond!" she said as the shades faded back into view. "A miracle!"

"Not a miracle," Silence said. "Just luck. We killed him in time. Another second, and they'd have enraged."

William Ann wrapped her arms around herself. "Oh, shadows. Oh, shadows. I thought we were dead. Oh, shadows."

Suddenly, Silence remembered something. The third man. She hadn't finished strangling him before Chesterton ran. She stumbled to her feet, turning.

He lay there, immobile.

"I finished him off," William Ann said. "Had to strangle him with my hands. My hands . . ."

Silence glanced back at her. "You did well, girl. You probably saved our lives. If you hadn't been here, I'd never have killed Chesterton without enraging the shades."

The girl still stared out into the woods, watching the placid shades. "What would it take?" she asked. "For you to see a miracle instead of a coincidence?"

"It would take a miracle, obviously," Silence said, picking up her knife. "Instead of just a coincidence. Come on. Let's put a second sack on these fellows."

William Ann joined her, lethargic as she helped put sacks on the heads of the bandits. Two sacks each, just in case. Blood was the most dangerous. Running drew shades, but slowly. Fire enraged them immediately, but it also blinded and confused them.

Blood, though . . . blood shed in anger, exposed to the open air . . . a single drop could make the shades slaughter you, and then everything else within their sight.

Silence checked each man for a heartbeat, just in case, and found none. They saddled the horses and heaved the corpses, including the lookout, into the saddles and tied them in place. They took the

bedrolls and other equipment too. Hopefully the men would have some silver on them. Bounty laws let Silence keep what she found unless there was specific mention of something stolen. In this case, the forts just wanted Chesterton dead. Pretty much everyone did.

Silence pulled a rope tight, then paused.

"Mother!" William Ann said, noticing the same thing. Leaves rustling out in the Forests. They'd uncovered their jar of green glowpaste to join that of the bandits, so the small campsite was well illuminated as a gang of eight men and women on horseback rode in through the Forests.

They were from the forts. The nice clothing, the way they kept looking into the Forests at the shades . . . Fortfolk for certain. Silence stepped forward, wishing she had her hammer to look at least a little threatening. That was still tied in the sack around Chesterton's head. It would have blood on it, so she couldn't get it out until that dried or she was in someplace very, *very* safe.

"Now, look at this," said the man at the front of the newcomers. "I couldn't believe what Tobias told me when he came back from scouting, but it appears to be true. All five men in Chesterton's gang, killed by a couple of Forest homesteaders?"

"Who are you?" Silence asked.

"Red Young," the man said with a tip of the hat. "I've been tracking this lot for the last four months. I can't thank you enough for taking care of them for me." He waved to a few of his people, who dismounted.

"Mother!" William Ann hissed.

Silence studied Red's eyes. He was armed with a cudgel, and one of the women behind him had one of those new crossbows with the blunt tips. They cranked fast and hit hard, but didn't draw blood.

"Step away from the horses, child," Silence said.

"But—"

"Step away." Silence dropped the rope of the horse she was leading. Three fort city people gathered up the ropes, one of the men leering at William Ann.

"You're a smart one," Red said, leaning down and studying Silence. One of his women walked past, towing Chesterton's horse with the man's corpse slumped over the saddle.

Silence stepped up, resting a hand on Chesterton's saddle. The woman towing it paused, then looked at her boss. Silence slipped her knife from its sheath.

"You'll give us something," Silence said to Red, knife hand hidden. "After what we did. One quarter, and I don't say a word."

"Sure," he said, tipping his hat to her. He had a fake kind of grin, like one in a painting. "One quarter it is."

Silence nodded. She slipped the knife against one of the thin ropes that held Chesterton in the saddle. That gave her a good cut on it as the woman pulled the horse away. Silence stepped back, resting her hand on William Ann's shoulder while covertly moving the knife back into its sheath.

Red tipped his hat to her again. In moments, the bounty hunters had retreated back through the trees toward the roadway.

"One quarter?" William Ann hissed. "You think he'll pay it?"

"Hardly," Silence said, picking up her pack. "We're lucky he didn't just kill us. Come on." She moved out into the Forests. William Ann walked with her, both moving with the careful steps the Forests demanded. "It might be time for you to return to the waystop, William Ann."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Get our bounty back." She was a Forescout, dammit. No prim fort man was going to steal from her.

"You mean to cut them off at the white span, I assume. But what will you do? We can't fight so many, Mother."

"I'll find a way." That corpse meant freedom—*life*—for her daughters. She would not let it slip away like smoke between the fingers. They entered the darkness, passing shades that had, just a short time before, been almost ready to wither them. Now the shades drifted away, completely indifferent toward their flesh.

Think, Silence. Something is very wrong here. How had those men found the camp? The light? Had they overheard her and William Ann talking? They'd claimed to have been chasing Chesterton for months. Shouldn't she have caught wind of them before now? These men and women looked too crisp to have been out in the Forests for months trailing killers.

It led to a conclusion she did not want to admit. One man had known she was hunting a bounty today and had seen how she was planning to track that bounty. One man had cause to see that bounty stolen from her.

Theopolis, I hope I'm wrong, she thought. *Because if you're behind this . . .*

Silence and William Ann trudged through the guts of the Forest, a place where the gluttonous canopy above drank in all of the light, leaving the ground below barren. Shades patrolled these wooden halls like blind sentries. Red and his bounty hunters were of the forts. They would keep to the roadways, and that was her advantage. The Forests were no friend to a homesteader, no more than a familiar chasm was any less dangerous a drop.

But Silence was a sailor on this abyss. She could ride its winds better than any fortdweller. Perhaps it was time to make a storm.

What homesteaders called the “white span” was a section of roadway lined by mushroom fields. It took about an hour through the Forests to reach the span, and Silence was feeling the price of a night without sleep by the time she arrived. She ignored the fatigue, tromping through the field of mushrooms, holding her jar of green light and giving an ill cast to trees and furrows in the land.

The roadway bent around through the Forests, then came back this way. If the men were heading toward Lastport or any of the other nearby forts, they would come this direction. “You continue on,” Silence said to William Ann. “It’s only another hour’s hike back to the waystop. Check on things there.”

“I’m not leaving you, Mother.”

“You promised to obey. Would you break your word?”

“And you promised to let me help you. Would you break yours?”

“I don’t need you for this,” Silence said. “And it will be dangerous.”

“What are you going to do?”

Silence stopped beside the roadway, then knelt, fishing in her pack. She came out with the small keg of gunpowder. William Ann went as white as the mushrooms.

“Mother!”

Silence untied her grandmother’s firestarter. She didn’t know for certain if it still worked. She’d never dared compress the two metal arms, which looked like tongs. Squeezing them together would grind the ends against one another, making sparks, and a spring at the joint would make them come back apart.

Silence looked up at her daughter, then held the firestarter up beside her head. William Ann stepped back, then glanced to the sides, toward nearby shades.

“Are things really that bad?” the girl whispered. “For us, I mean?”

Silence nodded.

“All right then.”

Fool girl. Well, Silence wouldn’t send her away. The truth was, she probably *would* need help. She intended to get that corpse. Bodies were heavy, and there wasn’t any way she’d be able to cut off just the head. Not out in the Forests, with shades about.

She dug into her pack, pulling out her medical supplies. They were tied between two small boards, intended to be used as splints. It was not difficult to tie the two boards to either side of the firestarter. With her hand trowel, she dug a small hole in the roadway’s soft earth, about the size of the powder keg.

She then opened the plug to the keg and set it into the hole. She soaked her handkerchief in the lamp oil, stuck one end in the keg, then positioned the firestarter boards on the road with the end of the kerchief next to the spark-making heads. After covering the

contraption with some leaves, she had a rudimentary trap. If someone stepped on the top board, that would press it down and grind out sparks to light the kerchief. Hopefully.

She couldn't afford to light the fire herself. The shades would come first for the one who made the fire.

"What happens if they don't step on it?" William Ann asked.

"Then we move it to another place on the road and try again," Silence said.

"That could shed blood, you realize."

Silence didn't reply. If the trap was triggered by a footfall, the shades wouldn't see Silence as the one causing it. They'd come first for the one who triggered the trap. But if blood was drawn, they would enrage. Soon after, it wouldn't matter who had caused it. All would be in danger.

"We have hours of darkness left," Silence said. "Cover your glowpaste."

William Ann nodded, hastily putting the cover on her jar. Silence inspected her trap again, then took William Ann by the shoulder and pulled her to the side of the roadway. The underbrush was thicker there, as the road tended to wind through breaks in the canopy. People sought out places in the Forests where they could see the sky.

The bounty hunters came along eventually. Silent, illuminated by a jar of glowpaste each. Fortfolk didn't talk at night. They passed the trap, which Silence had placed on the narrowest section of roadway. She held her breath, watching the horses pass, step after step missing the lump that marked the board. William Ann covered her ears, hunkering down.

A hoof hit the trap. Nothing happened. Silence released an annoyed breath. What would she do if the firestarter was broken? Could she find another way to—

The explosion struck her, the wave of force shaking her body. Shades vanished in a blink, green eyes snapping open. Horses reared and whinnied, men and women yelling.

Silence shook off her stupefaction, grabbing William Ann by the shoulder and pulling her out of hiding. Her trap had worked better than she'd assumed; the burning rag had allowed the horse who had triggered the trap to take a few steps before the blast hit. No blood, just a lot of surprised horses and confused people. The little keg of gunpowder hadn't done as much damage as she'd anticipated—the stories of what gunpowder could do were often as fanciful as stories of the Homeland—but the sound had been incredible.

Silence's ears rang as she fought through the confused fortfolk, finding what she'd hoped to see. Chesterton's corpse lay on the ground, dumped from saddleback by a bucking horse and a frayed

rope. She grabbed the corpse under the arms and William Ann took the legs. They moved sideways into the Forests.

"Idiots!" Red bellowed from amid the confusion. "Stop her! It—"

He cut off as shades swarmed the roadway, descending upon the men. Red had managed to keep his horse under control, but now he had to dance it back from the shades. Enraged, they had turned pure black, though the blast of light and fire had obviously left them dazed. They fluttered about, like moths at a flame. Green eyes. A small blessing. If those turned red . . .

One bounty hunter, standing on the road and spinning about, was struck. His back arched, black-veined tendrils crisscrossing his skin. He dropped to his knees, screaming as the flesh of his face shrank around his skull.

Silence turned away. William Ann watched the fallen man with a horrified expression.

"Slowly, child," Silence said in what she hoped was a comforting voice. She hardly felt comforting. "Carefully. We can move away from them. William Ann. Look at me."

The girl turned to look at her.

"Hold my eyes. Move. That's right. Remember, the shades will go to the source of the fire first. They are confused, stunned. They can't smell fire like they do blood, and they'll look from it to the nearest rapid motion. Slowly, easily. Let the scrambling fortfolk distract them."

The two of them eased into the Forests with excruciating deliberateness. In the face of so much chaos, so much danger, their pace felt like a crawl. Red organized a resistance. Fire-crazed shades could be fought, destroyed, with silver. More and more would come, but if the bounty hunters were clever and lucky, they'd be able to destroy those nearby and then move slowly away from the source of the fire. They could hide, survive. Maybe.

Unless one of them accidentally drew blood.

Silence and William Ann stepped through a field of mushrooms that glowed like the skulls of rats and broke silently beneath their feet. Luck was not completely with them, for as the shades shook off their disorientation from the explosion, a pair of them on the outskirts turned and struck out toward the fleeing women.

William Ann gasped. Silence deliberately set down Chesterton's shoulders, then took out her knife. "Keep going," she whispered. "Pull him away. Slowly, girl. *Slowly.*"

"I won't leave you!"

"I will catch up," Silence said. "You aren't ready for this."

She didn't look to see if William Ann obeyed, for the shades—figures of jet black streaking across the white-knobbed ground—were

upon her. Strength was meaningless against shades. They had no real substance. Only two things mattered: your speed and not letting yourself be frightened.

Shades *were* dangerous, but so long as you had silver, you could fight. Many a man died because he ran, drawing even more shades, rather than standing his ground.

Silence swung at the shades as they reached her. *You want my daughter, hellbound?* she thought with a snarl. *You should have tried for the fortfolk instead.*

She swept her knife through the first shade, as Grandmother had taught. *Never creep back and cower before shades. You're Forescout blood. You claim the Forests. You are their creature as much as any other. As am I. . . .*

Her knife passed through the shade with a slight tugging feeling, creating a shower of bright white sparks that sprayed out of the shade. The shade pulled back, its black tendrils writhing about one another.

Silence spun on the other. The pitch sky let her see only the thing's eyes, a horrid green, as it reached for her. She lunged.

Its spectral hands were upon her, the icy cold of its fingers gripping her arm below the elbow. She could feel it. Shade fingers had substance; they could grab you, hold you back. Only silver warded them away. Only with silver could you fight.

She rammed her arm in farther. Sparks shot out its back, spraying like a bucket of washwater. Silence gasped at the horrid, icy pain. Her knife slipped from fingers she could no longer feel. She lurched forward, falling to her knees as the second shade fell backward, then began spinning about in a mad spiral. The first one flopped on the ground like a dying fish, trying to rise, its top half falling over.

The cold of her arm was so *bitter*. She stared at the wounded arm, watching the flesh of her hand wither upon itself, pulling in toward the bone.

She heard weeping.

You stand there, Silence. Grandmother's voice. Memories of the first time she'd killed a shade. *You do as I say. No tears! Forescouts don't cry. Forescouts DON'T CRY.*

She had learned to hate her that day. Ten years old, with her little knife, shivering and weeping in the night as her grandmother had enclosed her and a drifting shade in a ring of silver dust.

Grandmother had run around the perimeter, enraging it with motion. While Silence was trapped in there. With death.

The only way to learn is to do, Silence. And you'll learn, one way or another!

"Mother!" William Ann said.

Silence blinked, coming out of the memory as her daughter dumped

silver dust on the exposed arm. The withering stopped as William Ann, choking against her thick tears, dumped the entire pouch of emergency silver over the hand. The metal reversed the withering, and the skin turned pink again, the blackness melting away in sparks of white.

Too much, Silence thought. William Ann had used all of the silver dust in her haste, far more than one wound needed. It was difficult to summon any anger, for feeling flooded back into her hand and the icy cold retreated.

"Mother?" William Ann asked. "I left you, as you said. But he was so heavy, I didn't get far. I came back for you. I'm sorry. I came back for you!"

"Thank you," Silence said, breathing in. "You did well." She reached up and took her daughter by the shoulder, then used the once-withered hand to search in the grass for Grandmother's knife. When she brought it up, the blade was blackened in several places, but still good.

Back on the road, the fortfolk had made a circle and were holding off the shades with silver-tipped spears. The horses had all fled or been consumed. Silence fished on the ground, coming up with a small handful of silver dust. The rest had been expended in the healing. Too much.

No use worrying about that now, she thought, stuffing the handful of dust in her pocket. "Come," she said, hauling herself to her feet. "I'm sorry I never taught you to fight them."

"Yes you did," William Ann said, wiping her tears. "You've told me all about it."

Told. Never shown. *Shadows, Grandmother. I know I disappoint you, but I won't do it to her. I can't. But I am a good mother. I* will *protect them.*

The two left the mushrooms, taking up their grisly prize again and tromping through the Forests. They passed more darkened shades floating toward the fight. All of those sparks would draw them. The fortfolk were dead. Too much attention, too much struggle. They'd have a thousand shades upon them before the hour was out.

Silence and William Ann moved slowly. Though the cold had mostly retreated from Silence's hand, there was a lingering . . . something. A deep shiver. A limb touched by the shades wouldn't feel right for months.

That was far better than what could have happened. Without William Ann's quick thinking, Silence could have become a cripple. Once the withering settled in—that took a little time, though it varied—it was irreversible.

Something rustled in the woods. Silence froze, causing William Ann

to stop and glance about.

"Mother?" William Ann whispered.

Silence frowned. The night was so black, and they'd been forced to leave their lights. *Something's out there,* she thought, trying to pierce the darkness. *What are you?* God Beyond protect them if the fighting had drawn one of the Deepest Ones.

The sound did not repeat. Reluctantly, Silence continued on. They walked for a good hour, and in the darkness Silence hadn't realized they'd neared the roadway again until they stepped onto it.

Silence heaved out a breath, setting down their burden and rolling her tired arms in their joints. Some light from the Starbelt filtered down upon them, illuminating something like a large jawbone to their left. The Old Bridge. They were almost home. The shades here weren't even agitated; they moved with their lazy, almost butterfly, gaits.

Her arms felt so sore. That body felt as if it were getting heavier every moment. People often didn't realize how heavy a corpse was. Silence sat down. They'd rest for a time before continuing on. "William Ann, do you have any water left in your canteen?"

William Ann whimpered.

Silence started, then scrambled to her feet. Her daughter stood beside the bridge, and something dark stood behind her. A green glow suddenly illuminated the night as the figure took out a small vial of glowpaste. By that sickly light, Silence could see that the figure was Red.

He held a dagger to William Ann's neck. The fort man had not fared well in the fighting. One eye was now a milky white, half his face blackened, his lips pulled back from his teeth. A shade had gotten him across the face. He was lucky to be alive.

"I figured you'd come back this way," he said, the words slurred by his shriveled lips. Spittle dripped from his chin. "Silver. Give me your silver."

His knife . . . it was common steel.

"*Now!*" he roared, pulling the knife closer to William Ann's neck. If he so much as nicked her, the shades would be upon them in heartbeats.

"I only have the knife," Silence lied, taking it out and tossing it to the ground before him. "It's too late for your face, Red. That withering has set in."

"I don't care," he hissed. "Now the body. Step away from it, woman. Away!"

Silence stepped to the side. Could she get to him before he killed William Ann? He'd have to grab that knife. If she sprang just right . . .

"You killed my crew," Red growled. "They're dead, all of them. God, if I hadn't rolled into the hollow . . . I had to *listen* to it. Listen to

them being slaughtered!"

"You were the only smart one," she said. "You couldn't have saved them, Red."

"Bitch! You killed them."

"They killed themselves," she whispered. "You come to my Forests, take what is mine? It was your crew or my children, Red."

"Well, if you want your child to live through this, you'll stay very still. Girl, pick up that knife."

Whimpering, William Ann knelt. Red mimicked her, staying just behind her, watching Silence, holding the knife steady. William Ann picked up the knife in trembling hands.

Red pulled the silver knife from William Ann, then held it in one hand, the common knife at her neck in the other. "Now, the girl is going to carry the corpse, and you're going to wait right there. I don't want you coming near."

"Of course," Silence said, already planning. She couldn't afford to strike right now. He was too careful. She would follow through the Forests, along the road, and wait for a moment of weakness. Then she'd strike.

Red spat to the side.

Then a padded crossbow bolt shot from the night and took him in the shoulder, jolting him. His blade slid across William Ann's neck, and a dribble of blood ran down it. The girl's eyes widened in horror, though it was little more than a nick. The danger to her throat wasn't important.

The blood was.

Red tumbled back, gasping, hand to his shoulder. A few drops of blood glistened on his knife. The shades in the Forests around them went black. Glowing green eyes burst alight, then deepened to crimson.

Red eyes in the night. Blood in the air.

"Oh, hell!" Red screamed. "Oh, *hell*." Red eyes swarmed around him. There was no hesitation here, no confusion. They went straight for the one who had drawn blood.

Silence reached for William Ann as the shades descended. Red grabbed the girl and shoved her through a shade, trying to stop it. He spun and dashed the other direction.

William Ann passed through the shade, her face withering, skin pulling in at the chin and around the eyes. She stumbled through the shade and into Silence's arms.

Silence felt an immediate, overwhelming panic.

"No! Child, no. No. *No* . . ."

William Ann worked her mouth, making a choking sound, her lips pulling back toward her teeth, her eyes open wide as her skin

tightened and her eyelids shriveled.

Silver. I need silver. I can save her. Silence snapped her head up, clutching William Ann. Red ran down the roadway, slashing the silver dagger all about, spraying light and sparks. Shades surrounded him. Hundreds, like ravens flocking to a roost.

Not that way. The shades would finish with him soon and would look for flesh—any flesh. William Ann still had blood on her neck. They'd come for her next. Even without that, the girl was withering fast.

The dagger wouldn't be enough to save William Ann. Silence needed dust, silver dust, to force down her daughter's throat. Silence fumbled in her pocket, coming out with the small bit of silver dust there.

Too little. She *knew* that would be too little. Her grandmother's training calmed her mind, and everything became immediately clear.

The waystop was close. She had more silver there.

"M . . . Mother . . ."

Silence heaved William Ann into her arms. Too light, the flesh drying. Then she turned and ran with everything she had across the bridge.

Her arms stung, weakened from having hauled the corpse so far. The corpse . . . she couldn't lose it!

No. She couldn't think on that. The shades would have it, as warm enough flesh, soon after Red was gone. There would be no bounty. She had to focus on William Ann.

Silence's tears felt cold on her face as she ran, wind blowing her. Her daughter trembled and shook in her arms, spasming as she died. She'd become a shade if she died like this.

"I won't lose you!" Silence said into the night. "Please. I won't lose you. . . ."

Behind her, Red screamed a long, wailing screech of agony that cut off at the end as the shades feasted. Near her, other shades stopped, eyes deepening to red.

Blood in the air. Eyes of crimson.

"I hate you," Silence whispered into the air as she ran. Each step was agony. She *was* growing old. "I hate you! What you did to me. What you did to us."

She didn't know if she was speaking to Grandmother or the God Beyond. So often, they were the same in her mind. Had she ever realized that before?

Branches lashed at her as she pushed forward. Was that light ahead? The waystop?

Hundreds upon hundreds of red eyes opened in front of her. She stumbled to the ground, spent, William Ann like a heavy bundle of

branches in her arms. The girl trembled, her eyes rolled back in her head.

Silence held out the small bit of silver dust she'd recovered earlier. She longed to pour it on William Ann, save her a little pain, but she knew with clarity that was a waste. She looked down, crying, then took the dust and made a small circle around the two of them. What else could she do?

William Ann shook with a seizure as she rasped, drawing in breaths and clawing at Silence's arms. The shades came by the dozens, huddling around the two of them, smelling the blood. The flesh.

Silence pulled her daughter close. She should have gone for the knife after all; it wouldn't heal William Ann, but she could have at least fought with it.

Without that, without anything, she failed. Grandmother had been right all along.

"Hush now, my dear one . . ." Silence whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. "Be not afraid."

Shades came at her frail barrier, throwing up sparks, making Silence open her eyes. They backed away, then others came, beating against the silver, their red eyes illuminating writhing black forms.

"Night comes upon us . . ." Silence whispered, choking at the words, ". . . but sunlight will break."

William Ann arched her back, then fell still.

"Sleep now . . . my . . . my dear one . . . let your tears fade. Darkness surrounds us, but someday . . . we'll wake. . . ."

So tired. *I shouldn't have let her come.*

If she hadn't, Chesterton would have gotten away from her, and she'd have probably fallen to the shades then. William Ann and Sebruki would have become slaves to Theopolis, or worse.

No choices. No way out.

"Why did you send us here?" she screamed, looking up past hundreds of glowing red eyes. "What is the point?"

There was no answer. There was never an answer.

Yes, that *was* light ahead; she could see it through the low tree branches in front of her. She was only a few yards from the waystop. She would die, like Grandmother had, mere paces from her home.

She blinked, cradling William Ann as the tiny silver barrier failed.

That . . . that branch just in front of her. It had such a very odd shape. Long, thin, no leaves. Not like a branch at all. Instead, like . . .

Like a crossbow bolt.

It had lodged into the tree after being fired from the waystop earlier in the day. She remembered facing down that bolt earlier, staring at its reflective end.

Silver.

Silence Montane crashed through the back door of the waystop, hauling a desiccated body behind her. She stumbled into the kitchen, barely able to walk, and dropped the silver-tipped bolt from a withered hand.

Her skin continued to pull tight, her body shriveling. She had not been able to avoid withering, not when fighting so many shades. The crossbow bolt had merely cleared a path, allowing her to push forward in a last, frantic charge.

She could barely see. Tears streamed from her clouded eyes. Even with the tears, her eyes felt as dry as if she had been standing in the wind for an hour while holding them wide open. Her lids refused to blink, and she couldn't move her lips.

She had . . . powder. Didn't she?

Thought. Mind. What?

She moved without thought. Jar on the windowsill. In case of broken circle. She unscrewed the lid with fingers like sticks. Seeing them horrified a distant part of her mind.

Dying. I'm dying.

She dunked the jar of silver powder in the water cistern and pulled it out, then stumbled to William Ann. She fell to her knees beside the girl, spilling much of the water. The rest she dumped on her daughter's face with a shaking arm.

Please. Please.

Darkness.

"We were sent here to be strong," Grandmother said, standing on the cliff edge overlooking the waters. Her whited hair curled in the wind, writhing like the wisps of a shade.

She turned back to Silence, and her weathered face was covered in droplets of water from the crashing surf below. "The God Beyond sent us. It's part of the plan."

"It's so easy for you to say that, isn't it?" Silence spat. "You can fit anything into that nebulous *plan*. Even the destruction of the world itself."

"I won't hear blasphemy from you, child." A voice like boots stepping in gravel. She walked toward Silence. "You can rail against the God Beyond, but it will change nothing. William was a fool and an idiot. You are better off. We are *Forescouts*. We *survive*. We will be the ones to defeat the Evil, someday." She passed Silence by.

Silence had never seen a smile from Grandmother, not since her husband's death. Smiling was wasted energy. And love . . . love was for the people back in Homeland. The people who'd perished from the Evil.

"I'm with child," Silence said.

Grandmother stopped. "William?"

"Who else?"

Grandmother continued on.

"No condemnations?" Silence asked, turning, folding her arms.

"It's done," Grandmother said. "We are Forescouts. If this is how we must continue, so be it. I'm more worried about the waystop, and meeting our payments to those damn forts."

I have an idea for that, Silence thought, considering the lists of bounties she'd begun collecting. *Something even you wouldn't dare. Something dangerous. Something unthinkable.*

Grandmother reached the woods and looked at Silence, scowled, then pulled on her hat and stepped into the trees.

"I will not have you interfering with my child," Silence called after her. "I will raise my own as I will!"

Grandmother vanished into the shadows.

Please. Please.

"I *will*!"

I won't lose you. I won't . . .

Silence gasped, coming awake and clawing at the floorboards, staring upward.

Alive. She was alive!

Dob the stableman knelt beside her, holding the jar of powdered silver. She coughed, lifting fingers—plump, the flesh restored—to her neck. It was hale, though ragged from the flakes of silver that had been forced down her throat. Her skin was dusted with black bits of ruined silver.

"William Ann!" she said, turning.

The child lay on the floor beside the door. William Ann's left side, where she'd first touched the shade, was blackened. Her face wasn't too bad, but her hand was a withered skeleton. They'd have to cut that off. Her leg looked bad too. Silence couldn't tell how bad without tending the wounds.

"Oh, child . . ." Silence knelt beside her.

But the girl breathed in and out. That was enough, all things considered.

"I tried," Dob said. "But you'd already done what could be done."

"Thank you," Silence said. She turned to the aged man, with his high forehead and dull eyes.

"Did you get him?" Dob asked.

"Who?"

"The bounty."

"I . . . yes, I did. But I had to leave him."

"You'll find another," Dob said in his monotone, climbing to his feet. "The Fox always does."

"How long have you known?"

"I'm an idiot, mam," he said. "Not a fool." He bowed his head to her, then walked away, slump-backed as always.

Silence climbed to her feet, then groaned, picking up William Ann. She lifted her daughter to the rooms above and saw to her.

The leg wasn't as bad as Silence had feared. A few of the toes would be lost, but the foot itself was hale enough. The entire left side of William Ann's body was blackened, as if burned. That would fade, with time, to grey.

Everyone who saw her would know exactly what had happened. Many men would never touch her, fearing her taint. This might just doom her to a life alone.

I know a little about such a life, Silence thought, dipping a cloth into the water bin and washing William Ann's face. The youth would sleep through the day. She had come very close to death, to becoming a

shade herself. The body did not recover quickly from that.

Of course, Silence had been close to that too. She, however, had been there before. Another of Grandmother's preparations. Oh, how she hated that woman. Silence owed who she was to how that training had toughened her. Could she be thankful for Grandmother and hateful, both at once?

Silence finished washing William Ann, then dressed her in a soft nightgown and left her in her bunk. Sebruki still slept off the draught William Ann had given her.

So she went downstairs to the kitchen to think difficult thoughts. She'd lost the bounty. The shades would have had at that body; the skin would be dust, the skull blackened and ruined. She had no way to prove that she'd taken Chesterton.

She settled against the kitchen table and laced her hands before her. She wanted to have at the whiskey instead, to dull the horror of the night.

She thought for hours. Could she pay Theopolis off some way? Borrow from someone else? Who? Maybe find another bounty. But so few people came through the waystop these days. Theopolis had already given her warning, with his writ. He wouldn't wait more than a day or two for payment before claiming the waystop as his own.

Had she really gone through so much, still to lose?

Sunlight fell on her face and a breeze from the broken window tickled her cheek, waking her from her slumber at the table. Silence blinked, stretching, limbs complaining. Then she sighed, moving to the kitchen counter. She'd left out all of the materials from the preparations last night, her clay bowls thick with glowpaste that still shone faintly. The silver-tipped crossbow bolt lay by the back door where she'd dropped it. She'd need to clean up and get breakfast ready for her few guests. Then, think of *some* way to . . .

The back door opened and someone stepped in.

. . . to deal with Theopolis. She exhaled softly, looking at him in his clean clothing and condescending smile. He tracked mud onto her floor as he entered. "Silence Montane. Nice morning, hmmm?"

Shadows, she thought. *I don't have the mental strength to deal with him right now.*

He moved to close the window shutters.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Hmmm? Haven't you warned me before that you loathe that people might see us together? That they might get a hint that you are turning in bounties to me? I'm just trying to protect you. Has something happened? You look awful, hmmm?"

"I know what you did."

"You do? But, see, I do many things. About what do you speak?"

Oh, how she'd like to cut that grin from his lips and cut out his throat, stomp out that annoying Lastport accent. She couldn't. He was just so blasted *good* at acting. She had guesses, probably good ones. But no proof.

Grandmother would have killed him right then. Was she so desperate to prove him wrong that she'd lose everything?

"You were in the Forests," Silence said. "When Red surprised me at the bridge, I assumed that the thing I'd heard—rustling in the darkness—had been him. It wasn't. He implied he'd been waiting for us at the bridge. That thing in the darkness, it was you. *You* shot him with the crossbow to jostle him, make him draw blood. Why, Theopolis?"

"Blood?" Theopolis said. "In the night? And you *survived*? You're quite fortunate, I should say. Remarkable. What else happened?"

She said nothing.

"I have come for payment of debt," Theopolis said. "You have no bounty to turn in then, hmmm? Perhaps we will need my document after all. So kind of me to bring another copy. This really will be wonderful for us both. Do you not agree?"

"Your feet are glowing."

Theopolis hesitated, then looked down. There, the mud he'd tracked in shone very faintly blue in the light of the glowpaste remnants.

"You followed me," she said. "You *were* there last night."

He looked up at her with a slow, unconcerned expression. "And?" He took a step forward.

Silence backed away, her heel hitting the wall behind her. She reached around, taking out the key and unlocking the door behind her. Theopolis grabbed her arm, yanking her away as she pulled open the door.

"Going for one of your hidden weapons?" he asked with a sneer. "The crossbow you keep on the pantry shelf? Yes, I know of that. I'm disappointed, Silence. Can't we be civil?"

"I will never sign your document, Theopolis," she said, then spat at his feet. "I would sooner die, I would sooner be put out of house and home. You can take the waystop by force, but I will *not* serve you. You can be damned, for all I care, you bastard. You—"

He slapped her across the face. A quick but unemotional gesture. "Oh, do shut up."

She stumbled back.

"Such dramatics, Silence. I can't be the only one to wish you lived up to your name, hmmm?"

She licked her lip, feeling the pain of his slap. She lifted her hand to her face. A single drop of blood colored her fingertip when she pulled it away.

“You expect me to be frightened?” Theopolis asked. “I know we’re safe in here.”

“Fort city fool,” she whispered, then flipped the drop of blood at him. It hit him on the cheek. “Always follow the Simple Rules. Even when you think you don’t have to. And I wasn’t opening the pantry, as you thought.”

Theopolis frowned, then glanced over at the door she had opened. The door into the small old shrine. Her grandmother’s shrine to the God Beyond.

The bottom of the door was rimmed in silver.

Red eyes opened in the air behind Theopolis, a jet-black form coalescing in the shadowed room. Theopolis hesitated, then turned.

He didn’t get to scream as the shade took his head in its hands and drew his life away. It was a newer shade, its form still strong despite the writhing blackness of its clothing. A tall woman, hard of features, with curling hair. Theopolis opened his mouth, then his face withered away, eyes sinking into his head.

“You should have run, Theopolis,” Silence said.

His head began to crumble. His body collapsed to the floor.

“Hide from the green eyes, run from the red,” Silence said, retrieving the silver-tipped crossbow bolt from where it lay by the back door. “Your rules, Grandmother.”

The shade turned to her. Silence shivered, looking into those dead, glassy eyes of a matriarch she loathed and loved.

“I hate you,” Silence said. “Thank you for making me hate you.” She held the crossbow bolt before her, but the shade did not strike. Silence edged around, forcing the shade back. It floated away from her, back into the shrine lined with silver at the bottom of its three walls, where Silence had trapped it years ago.

Her heart pounding, Silence closed the door, completing the barrier, and locked it again. No matter what happened, that shade left Silence alone. Almost, she thought it remembered. And almost, Silence felt guilty for trapping that soul inside the small closet for all these years.

Silence found Theopolis's hidden cave after six hours of hunting.

It was about where she'd expected it to be, in the hills not far from the Old Bridge. It included a silver barrier. She could harvest that. Good money there.

Inside the small cavern, she found Chesterton's corpse, which Theopolis had dragged to the cave while the shades killed Red and then hunted Silence. *I'm so glad, for once, you were a greedy man, Theopolis.*

She would have to find someone else to start turning in bounties for her. That would be difficult, particularly on short notice. She dragged the corpse out and threw it over the back of Theopolis's horse. A short hike took her back to the road, where she paused, then walked up and located Red's fallen corpse, withered down to just bones and clothing.

She fished out her grandmother's dagger, scored and blackened from the fight. It fit back into the sheath at her side. She trudged, exhausted, back to the waystop and hid Chesterton's corpse in the cold cellar out behind the stable, beside where she'd put Theopolis's remains. She hiked back into the kitchen. Beside the shrine's door where her grandmother's dagger had once hung, she had placed the silver crossbow bolt that Sebruki had unknowingly sent her.

What would the fort authorities say when she explained Theopolis's death to them? Perhaps she could claim to have found him like that. . . .

She paused, then smiled.

"Looks like you're lucky, friend," Daggon said, sipping at his beer. "The White Fox won't be looking for you anytime soon."

The spindly man, who still insisted his name was Earnest, hunkered down a little farther in his seat.

"How is it you're still here?" Daggon asked. "I traveled all the way to Lastport. I hardly expected to find you here on my path back."

"I hired on at a homestead nearby," said the slender-necked man. "Good work, mind you. Solid work."

"And you pay each night to stay here?"

"I like it. It feels peaceful. The homesteads don't have good silver protection. They just . . . let the shades move about. Even inside." The man shuddered.

Daggon shrugged, lifting his drink as Silence Montane limped by. Yes, she was a healthy-looking woman. He really *should* court her, one of these days. She scowled at his smile and dumped his plate in front of him.

"I think I'm wearing her down," Daggon said, mostly to himself, as she left.

"You will have to work hard," Earnest said. "Seven men have proposed to her during the last month."

"What!"

"The reward!" the spindly man said. "The one for bringing in Chesterton. Lucky woman, Silence Montane, finding the White Fox's lair like that."

Daggon dug into his meal. He didn't much like how things had turned out. That dandy Theopolis had been the White Fox all along? Poor Silence. How had it been, stumbling upon his cave and finding him inside, all withered away?

"They say that this Theopolis spent his last strength killing Chesterton," Earnest said, "then dragging him into the hole. Theopolis withered before he could get to his silver powder. Very like the White Fox, always determined to get the bounty, no matter what. We won't soon see a hunter like him again."

"I suppose not," Daggon said, though he'd much rather that the man had kept his skin. Now who would Daggon tell his tales about? He didn't fancy paying for his own beer.

Nearby, a greasy-looking fellow rose from his meal and shuffled out of the front door, looking half-drunk already, though it was only noon.

Some people. Daggon shook his head. "To the White Fox," he said, raising his drink.

Earnest clinked his mug to Daggon's. "The White Fox, meanest

bastard the Forests have ever known."

"May his soul know peace," Daggon said, "and may the God Beyond be thanked that he never decided we were worth his time."

"Amen," Earnest said.

"Of course," Daggon said, "there *is* still Bloody Kent. Now *he's* a right nasty fellow. You'd better hope he doesn't get your number, friend. And don't you give me that innocent look. These are the Forests. Everybody here has done something, now and then, that you don't want others to know about. . . ."

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